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RANSOM

RANSOM

BY
ANTHONY RICHARDSON

*"I never knew anybody . . . who has not had
to ransom himself out of the hands of Fate with
the payment of some dearest treasure or other."*

THACKERAY — *Pendennis*, vol. ii.



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TO
MY WIFE

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I

ILLUSION

“I am become a fool in glorying . . .”

RANSOM

CHAPTER I

HE entered the town from the north. It had been characteristic of him to step from the car four miles out, where the road crested the Barbary Ridge, and to choose to walk the rest of the way, sending Sophie on alone. He was not quite sure how this return would affect him. That was strange, because there were few things of which James Brockenholt was not certain. He had left the Four Mile Clump on his left, and on his right the downs fell away to a distant haze of trees embroidering the gaunt hunch of Martinsell. The wide lands were curiously still, varnished with the late sun, the air cupped golden in the little valleys expectant for night's release. The old road! The ring of his footsteps over the flint was a half-forgotten rhythm swaying through his brain. Twenty years ago! Well, it was a long time, when you came to think about it. Yet it seemed only yesterday that he'd made way over the downs on an evening just as this, running against the wind, knees bared, head down, panting in desperation because he must get back in time for Call. "Sweating" they'd call it. Running over this forsaken country-side for the good of your soul, so you could stomach forty minutes each way in

House Matches. How vivid his memory seemed all of a sudden. He was glad Sophie wasn't with him. They hadn't taught him much in the school. He could see now the red buildings and the chapel's tender spire lifting into the golden air. No, they hadn't taught him much, except — hardness. That was something. Almost everything. Now, he was coming back for the first time in twenty years. They knew he was coming too. His was the return he desired. Sophie had always said his soul was made of red carpet. "In that event," he'd told her, "yours is generally post-dated." That reminded him, Sophie would have to throttle Carlo down a bit if she was still hankering after Paris in the spring. Nevertheless, he hadn't come down to the old school for her edification and he was going to enjoy himself. She'd have to behave.

The street was practically deserted. The grey houses slept either side of the tilted road. He stopped by the town hall to indulge his memory. He hadn't meant to feel like this, but now, amid the half-forgotten surroundings, it seemed inevitable. Yes, there was Tucker's — same old name, same old shop: probably the same old buns, the ones with cream wedged in, that oozed out when you bit them, the sort you'd eaten on those days just before lunch — generally with two bars of chocolate. That made him laugh. Buns and chocolate! Half a crown a week was a fortune then. At the far end of the street he could see the twisted lane that ran up to the College. Turner's Lane! Every day for those three years when he'd been at the school he'd swaggered down that cobbled road, hands deep in his pockets, coat behind

his arms. Even then he'd been a "blood." The smudge of grey hair over his temples and the lines cutting into his cheeks, running from eye-corner to mouth-corner, were the only additions to James Brockenholt at thirty-eight to the Black Brockenholt of eighteen with the towering height of him and sombre eyes. A grim kind of boy, dark and wilful and very proud, now, a monstrous sort of man. It made him smile to think how they'd hated him at the school: feared him. Now they were going to welcome him back, bend the knee to him, salute him with smooth sweet phrases. Twenty years ago! I can see myself, he thought, coming down this road. I can smell that old indescribable smell of the town. Even the air has scent of vivid recollection. It's ridiculous of course, but somehow, I know chapel bell will go in a minute and I'll have to run like hell to get through Gates. The empty street was full of memories. A black-coated, capped crowd of them tramped the pavements. They swayed past him, boys. The place was alive with them. Hundreds and hundreds, till the sound of their imagined steps and laughter and earnest chatter tugged at his memory. Against his will, he saw himself amongst them, walked that ghostly walk with them, slipped back down the years till he was eighteen again, quick as flame, on the threshold. He wasn't accustomed to think like this. It was the sort of thing he'd disciplined himself to avoid. There was nothing satisfactory in probing beneath the surface of things: he'd realized that long ago. Only now, for once indulging himself, he felt again that dull ache deep inside, as if some creature of pain gnawed at his entrails.

It wasn't all my fault, he thought; I didn't want it that way. They made me hate them, because they hated me. He'd discovered at the school that element of his personality that had nearly always engendered fear in his companions, had developed it, learnt the use of it. It had been an asset. It had brought the thousands to him.

But, standing at the corner, the ghosts of his unhappy boyhood appeared more real than himself, than Sophie. He fought against the seething armies of them that thronged about him. He tried to thrust them away from him, knowing only too well what past bitterness they would bring for his torment. The years fell from him like leaves; he was here again, living through the intolerable ache of that time. Brockenholt of thirty-eight was for three minutes Brockenholt of eighteen. He saw himself, as it were, acting again that dismal part, and in the moment that joy and anguish filled him, even as it had done twenty years before. . . . He was walking down the street, proud and very bold, the recipient of admiring glances from the smaller boys, of envy from his equals. He walked by himself, conscious of his splendid isolation, of his position, because every one knew what a devil of a chap he was. He was the only one of them who had the guts! Moreover, there was a warm glow all through him. He was a Cesare Borgia, a Romeo, a buck. . . . How they hated his fine bravado, his bold appearance. "That's 'Black Brockenholt,'" this from tremulous new boys passing by. How envious they were! And then, and then . . . that other morning after he'd been caught! God, but it had been hard to look as if he didn't care,

didn't want their sympathy. They'd delivered his luggage at the station. It was midterm. Nobody else was going away, only he was leaving. He'd told them all he didn't care. He'd laughed their shy sympathy away. That had been the only thing to do — to laugh! But he had cared, he was caring now. No one had seen him off: that would have brought dishonour to some one. He was branded. Those sneering masters had scorched that name of ignominy on him. Every one knew. Every one felt ashamed of him in a sneaking way, when they would have done the same thing themselves — if they'd had the guts! He was striding out of the town with his head very high and his eyes very fierce to keep the shameful tears back. He wasn't taking any notice of the cruel inquisitive glances, of the frightened smiles of pity. He was going up the Station Road, taking his ticket, getting into the empty carriage, watching the buildings sweep across the window, and seeing far off the fist of Four Mile Clump thrusting from the downs, receding, receding . . . he was leaving, never coming back . . . he was crying in a hard rasping way, sitting upright, his hands cold and loose by his sides, crying bitterly for them to take him back, to give him another chance.

The sight of his car across the road brought him back to himself. Well, it was his innings now. What a fool he was making of himself, what a sentimental fool. It was funny! He shrugged his shoulders, and at the laughter against himself the memories died. He crossed the road to the Marlton Arms. His chauffeur met him on the steps, and touching his cap:

"Everything's in order, sir."

"Mr. Maude arrived?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Miss Wontner inside?"

"Yessir."

He went in. The hotel had a queer fusty smell, repellent at first, but curiously suggestive of age. There were rusty velvet curtains across the hall. The wall-paper was yellow-grey, and above his head a gas flare spurted a ragged flame. He noticed the brasswork was bright and well kept. A door to his right bore the faded token "Coffee Room." Ahead he could see a regiment of shining bottles topping the bar-counter. There was a subdued murmur of voices in the house, overhead a bumping of luggage, orders being given, running footsteps. From behind the curtain the landlord emerged, a short pumpkin of a man, his face very red, his eyes brightly greedy.

"Good evening, Mr. Brockenholt, I hope you'll find everything as you wish."

So they were beginning to kiss his hands already! A servant girl thrust her head round the door of the coffee room, drank deep of the visitor's handsome figure, disappeared. He turned to see the clerk in the office gazing at him with wonderment on his face.

"Everything as you wish — sir," repeated the landlord.

"It's sixpence," said Brockenholt deliberately, "to watch the animals feed."

"Of course, sir."

"Can I get a drink?"

They pushed past the curtains and entered the

bar. The girl in attendance was hustled aside. She regarded herself in the glass and patted her hair. She smiled at Brockenholt with a certain haughty disdain. She came from Swindon. *She* knew what was what, and how to carry yourself.

"Good evening," she said.

"Martini," said Brockenholt, and watched the colour stain her neck and cheeks. She turned to the glass for consolation. From that position she watched the wicked face of the visitor as he smiled at the landlord's agitation in deliberating between the French and Italian vermouths.

"We've no ice, I'm afraid, sir. I'm very sorry," he apologized.

"All right," and then, "you will join me?"

"Thank you, Mr. Brockenholt, it would be a great pleasure. A small whisky, thank you."

"No. A large one! And the lady?"

The girl from Swindon primed her lips.

"No, thank you. Not on duty."

Brockenholt regarded her steadily. Little sparks of fire flickered at the back of his eyes. One corner of his mouth twitched, and he lifted an eyebrow. A little wrinkle of mockery curved across his cheek.

"Of course you will," he said.

She chose a cherry brandy.

"If I may make so bold, sir," said the landlord at the second gulp, "I might say we've been awaiting your arrival with much interest, Mr. Brockenholt. That's so, isn't it, Miss Serjeant?"

"Of course," replied Miss Serjeant of Swindon, and fingered the black bow around her pink and powdered neck.

"We've heard naturally, Mr. Brockenholt, of

your — your great generosity to the College. And as you know, sir, yourself, anything good for the College is good for the town. I may add, sir, that we're very proud of the College, sir, as doubtless you know. The town prospers with the College, sir. We pride ourselves, Mr. Brockenholt, in being able to supply from time to time any little thing to gentlemen like yourself who was educated at the College."

"Naturally," said Brockenholt. "Matter of business. I'll have a gin and orange, please, and of course ——" he waved his hands towards them.

He regarded his glass, twisting the stem in his fingers.

"I used to get breakfast here the last day of term." He sipped his drink. "It used to cost me five shillings," he added dreamily. "But you weren't here then, of course."

"No, Mr. Brockenholt, I came here seven years ago. During the war."

"I see. I remember the town was the headquarters of the Southern Command. I should imagine you did well?"

"Very well, sir. As a man of business, you would appreciate that, Mr. Brockenholt."

"Yes," said Brockenholt, "I should appreciate that. I was in France at the time."

Miss Serjeant picked up a cloth and polished the counter.

"It must be most gratifying," she remarked, "for you to come back, Mr. Brockenholt, and to give the College such a beautiful gift."

"A man obviously wishes to show gratitude to those who taught 'im," cut in the landlord.

Brockenholt replaced his glass on the counter and buttoned his coat.

"I owe," he said coldly, "much to the institution that expelled me."

There was a moment's agonized silence.

"Go *on!*" exclaimed Miss Serjeant at last.

"She was rather like you," said Brockenholt, and smiling brilliantly left the bar.

Sophie was in the coffee room, kneeling on a chair by the window, looking out onto the dusky road outside. She thought the room was chilly. She'd never wanted to come down here. She'd told Jimmy so, three weeks ago.

"I can't see why you want to go down to that frowsy old place, anyway. It isn't as if you'd cared about it. You've not been near it for twenty years, and as for your giving the school fifteen thousand towards the new sanatorium or whatever it is — it's just a gesture, Jimmy. An extravagant way of getting your own back, because they chucked you out years back. Take me to Capri — we'll have a party! Do you remember, Jimmy, the first time, at Capri, that long dusty summer? . . ."

"I know," he'd interrupted. "But I'm going down — and you'd better come too."

"Well, Carlo must come."

"All right."

She was down here now, and didn't like it. Carlo hadn't come as yet, and it was just like Jimmy to get out of the car four miles out of the town and make her arrive alone. She'd pay him out. He was keeping her waiting now. A free wind swept the street, snatching at paper in the gutter, tossing

it high; a cart rumbled over the hill into the sunset; through the open window the sound of innumerable sheep-bells, tinkling on the distant downlands, twittered into the room. There was something so bare and desolate, even in late summer, about this big country, that made her feel empty and cold. All around the town, clustering in the elbow of the valley, the open spaces spread out to the cloudy horizons. They frightened her. She liked warmth and cat-cosiness, nooks and hot fires. The wind dropped as suddenly as it had arisen, and over the crooked chimney-pots opposite a necklace of clouds turned from purple to rose and gold. Carlo would never have dragged her down here. She wouldn't have come for Carlo. Funny how she was always doing what Jimmy wanted; almost against her will, as it were.

Brockenholt, entering the room quietly, standing behind her, surveying her with half-shut eyes. She's angry, he thought. He moved to her side, and as she turned her head slowly, her eyes hard behind their long dark lashes:

"Well?" he asked.

"It's a rotten place!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"There's some dinner for us in the room down the passage. Or do we wait for Carlo?"

"Oh! damn Carlo!" she said; "let's go and feed. I'm famished."

But at the end of the meal, a cigarette wedged between her tight little red lips, her red short hair in a shock about her head, and her hands clasped under her chin, she asked suddenly:

"Jimmy, what's the matter with you?"

He shook the mood off him.

"Nothing, Sophie."

She dabbed the lighted end of her cigarette into the ash-tray.

"Jimmy," she said, "let's go back. We'll leave a message for Carlo."

He shook his head.

"No. We'll see this through, Sophie. They expect me up at the school tomorrow to make a formal presentation."

She reached out and laid a cool hand on his.

"You're getting reminiscent, Jimmy. Maudlin. 'How innocent I was when I was young.' The place is getting on your nerves. I know you."

He took her forefinger in his hand and flicked at the nail.

"Yes, you know me, Sophie. Nobody else does. I'd like to explain to you, but I don't think I can. Things come back."

"Good Lord, man. That's not you."

"Oh, I know that. But you'd not understand. It's not quite that. Only — I was very happy here, then, sometimes. One's quit of the place now, really, but I stood this evening and looked down this street. I was there, Sophie, walking about, watching myself. It was a girl, you know. I can't even remember her name, but she kept a tobacco shop just opposite here. I never cared — much for the creature, and I'm quite sure she never cared — much for me. I used to go into her shop, because it was out of bounds. I used to take her out on to the downs, because it was forbidden. You know the sort of thing. Very silly. Very futile. Really, to all intents and purposes, per-

fectly harmless. One did it because one had the guts to do it, and it made you feel a man. Conceit. They caught me kissing her. That being a heinous crime, they expelled me. It was the best thing they ever did. It made me hard."

She took her hand off his and folded her arms, leaning on the table. She'd seen him once or twice before like this. There was a lot of the beast in him. That side she understood. She held him by that knowledge. She knew men, did Sophie. Her wisdom was her means of livelihood. But when Jimmie got "soft" she felt herself losing touch with him. You'd got to be hard. You'd got to choke those sentimental, almost unbusinesslike, emotions. You'd got to live. So she said:

"If I, Jimmy, let myself go back along the past it would be like walking down a red-hot cinder-track with bare feet."

He smiled at last.

"You're wonderful, Sophie."

"I'm not wonderful," she replied. "I'm just in control of myself. I hate sloppiness. You wouldn't like me, if I wasn't what I am."

"You're a monkey, Sophie. You never had a heart, you little beast."

"It's a hindrance," said she. "But go on, Jimmy, work it off."

Night filled the valleys miles out, flooded along the little town's wide street; the windows of the room were indistinct blurred squares. The half-light encircled them, and out of that between-time glow, Brockenholt told her:

"That's why I got out of the car at Barbary. There were two reasons: I didn't want you to see

me — coming into the town; and the idea of the great man entering on foot appealed to me. Oh, yes, I'm being frank. But honest to God, Sophie, I didn't know it would be quite so bad. I was here again, leaving the place. Men love their schools, Sophie. I loved mine. I was back on that morning, when I was leaving. I didn't know then that years after I'd laugh at my expulsion and other men 'ud laugh too. They told me then that I was a beast. God knows what for. When there's a girl . . . I thought then I was done for. I was so damn proud, and it hurt. I came down this very road outside red-hot with anger and shame. I'd got to go back to my people and tell 'em. That can be pretty hard. I stood on the station waiting for the train, and I swore then that I'd come back one day and they'd shake me by the hand. They made me hard, Sophie, those learned canting masters; it was their only gift to me, and the only one of their giving worth acceptance. But — they took something away."

He rose to his feet and stood by the window.

"They took something away. God knows what it was. God knows if it matters. But I'm hungry, Sophie, hungry for something."

She lit another cigarette, and blew out the flame of the match.

"I'm not laughing at you, Jimmy, but you're too damn funny for words."

"I know I am," he said; "what's the matter with me, Sophie?" He stepped beside her, and laid two immense hands on her shoulders, and shook her gently. "Tell me, Sophie," he said, "tell me, you witch."

"Poor old sinner," she murmured and, bending back her head, turned her mouth upwards to his.

But he left her then.

"You don't mind, girl? I want to walk this off. Carlo will arrive soon. I'll be back by ten."

"I don't want to be left, Jimmy."

Something of his customary brusqueness returned to him. He scowled down at her from his great height.

"You'll be all right," he said, and went.

It was dark outside. Half a dozen lamps were alight in the street. Windows were yellow. A public-house opposite suddenly filled with noise. A man rode past with a clatter of hoofs and rattled out of sight. The sparks of their cigarettes dotting the darkness, a group of young loiterers were standing at a corner, chipping the servant-girls swinging past, whistling, cat-calling softly. Only the old buildings above watched with rheumy shuttered eyes, nodding through the night, waiting for the moon to swim over them, for dawn's grey pencilling on the sky, for sunlight again. Day after day, night after night, standing patiently by strength of their old timbers.

He took the road to the Common, till at the top of the hill he could see the clustering lights of the town, and the glow of it eating into the dark. He stood there, watching, with a feeling of great desolation. The road that ran beneath him slipped away into the dim recesses of the downs. The leaves of a group of trees, near by, shivered dismally. The night flowed about him. He was in a semi-luminous world of his own. Distantly, the College bell clanged for chapel. He fled

from the mockery of it along the road, walking quickly, till his footsteps suddenly became silent on turf. Now the sound of the town was gone. Now only the wind upon the grass rustled quietly like the sea heard from a cliff. A silver radiance spread from a wall of cloud ahead of him, widening, painting the downs with high lights, cutting out the shapes of trees and bushes on either side, till he could see the Hackpen Hill, seven miles away, flung like an Ethiopian's arm across the horizon. But his eyes were blinded by his thoughts and he walked on till the lifting slope of Hackpen Hill lessened his pace. He stopped, sat down on a sarsen stone and lit a pipe. Tomorrow he must go in all his glory and be thanked formally for his gift to the school. He wondered what form the ceremony would take. At least it would be amusing to patronize the Head and his learned colleagues: to hear their thanks, to receive it casually, to — to shock them a little. He hoped Sophie wouldn't behave too outrageously. You never could tell what she'd say or do next and there was a week to put in down here. Besides, there was Carlo to account for. Certainly Carlo had had to come. Unattached females were not looked upon too favourably, he imagined, by the upholders of the monastic code that ruled the place. He didn't want to do anything that might be just beyond the limit of decorum. That wasn't done. Nevertheless, the idea of Carlo acting the part of chaperon was funny. Carlo, who just hadn't the money or the way with him to steal Sophie, who had held on to hope of that for years. Well, he wasn't afraid of Carlo. As for Sophie . . . he could manage her!

He'd never forgotten what Sophie had once told him.

"A woman'll love a man, Jimmy, for all the kicks he gives her, and go on loving him and then some. But if ever the breaking point is reached, then as she's loved him she'll hate him. She'll cut him out of her heart. That's true, Jimmy, but it doesn't affect us. We're not in love."

No, he didn't love Sophie and he supposed she didn't love him in the accepted sense of the word. But she carried her clothes well. She suited him. She was a good companion. "I'm a splendid clothes-horse," she'd informed him, "but the rate for hanging clouts on my line is very high." Well, he could afford it — easily. But as for love . . . that was life's three-card trick: you never spotted the queen. Wise men didn't waste time on tricks. That chaotic absurd embroiling of emotions that he and the tobacco-girl had had! You saw what that did for you, easily enough. A fit reward for fools. Women, as a class, were different. They were . . . women. Either they had children, and grew haggard producing, or else they remained charming — and amusing. An expensive amusement, perhaps. Of that crowd, the only crowd, Sophie was the pick of the bunch. She was straight. She'd never let you down. She knew the rules and kept them. She was as hard as nails and she wasn't cheap. Yet — yet down here, in this queer country, one realized — it was well to be honest though it made you laugh at yourself — that somehow, somewhere, there was a vacuum. One wanted something terribly badly. You'd give much for it, you'd fight to get it. You wanted it like the devil. But that didn't help you to find out what it was. If I knew,

he thought, I'd get it. And that was no vanity on his part. He spoke truth. When he saw, he took.

So far he had taken everything he wanted. That was why at thirty-eight he was, practically speaking, Lingfields Limited. He'd gone into the motor trade at nineteen: learning his work in the shops, greedy for knowledge, for power, sacrificing himself. He was like a thousand other men of his stamp: hard in work; soft in pleasure. He knew the business of both pursuits from top to bottom. Caught in the war, he'd turned his abilities to the new task in hand, and within six months of joining up had gained his majority. Nineteen-seventeen had seen him as Colonel Brockenholt, in charge of the transport at Abbeville. From that experience had come Lingfields. "Carter Paterson on the grand scale" he'd called it. The network of commercial motor-transport was already established in the Midlands. "We don't strike" was his token. It didn't worry him that Carlo Maude had started Motor-Transport in opposition. Carlo was too polished, too immaculate, like his syndicate. The public followed Brockenholt.

He made his way back to the town rapidly. As he reached the Common, a light sprang up in a top window of an isolated cottage. The sudden flash caught his eye and he looked up. A girl stood in the window, her fair hair, loose over her shoulders, was luminous before the candlelight. He could see her hands on the sill. He stopped in the shadow of the hedge and watched her. He had an eye for pretty women. But this girl wasn't only pretty, her mouth was too wide for that, and her forehead too high. Her eyes he couldn't

see, but he knew they were fixed on the far dark ridge of Barbary. He was not a romanticist, his imagination with women generally ran in a typical groove; nevertheless, there was something indefinitely beautiful about the girl; something fey, tantalizing. He knew she was lovely. It wasn't his custom to watch women under such circumstances. That was crude. But he watched this girl, who had suddenly come into being in the night. It was charming, an experience worth remembrance. He never forgot that first glimpse of Isabel. The light flickered, she moved, was gone — darkness.

When he reached the hotel Carlo had arrived. He was drinking whisky in the coffee room, and making inadequate love to Sophie.

"Hallo, Brock," he said. "Been getting sentimental, I hear. Sophie says the roses round the door have hit you badly." He lowered his eyes before Brockenholt's sudden thunderous glance, and examined the tips of his beautifully manicured nails.

"I'm off to bed," said Sophie, and left the room.

Maude stretched himself and twisted his wrist round to see the time.

"Night-night, Brock. We'll wake up this giddy town tomorrow."

Brockenholt lit his candle.

"Night-night, Brock."

"Look here," said that large friend of his, "you're going to behave yourself down here, Carlo."

Maude yawned.

"I'll do as I'm told, Brock. But we ought to sample the country wenches."

"Oh, go to hell," said Brockenholt, and stamped upstairs.

CHAPTER II

HE heard the song for the first time as next morning he entered the College gates. A small boy with a very small body and very long legs was singing it in unison with seven other small boys in a study window in the red building of the Junior House on his right. They sang, as small boys in such circumstances invariably sing, very shrilly, very badly. They sang neither from a sense of enjoyment nor from necessity; the time was the interval between morning school and last hour; they sang because they knew their housemaster was in his room beneath, and they wished to disturb him. Corporal proceedings against harmony at this moment were negligible. One had "break" to collect one's books; one was free in "break"; therefore, one (or seven) could sing. Therefore one sang. It was a song like scores of other songs, yet better. It was a revue-song and as sentimental as it was absurd. Its tune was so eminently tuneful that it was impossible to forget.

*"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming,
Stars a-dreaming,
Oh, I want cher, Yes! I want cher!"*

"I've heard that before," said Brockenholt.

"Of course you have," said Sophie. "It's from 'Brighter Brighton.' It's very popular."

"H'm," said Brockenholt, and tapped at the door of the lodge.

He had not been especially pleased at Sophie and Carlo insisting on accompanying him to the ceremony of gratitude. They, he knew, felt quite certain of a reception of bands and cheers and clappings. He himself was not so sure. He had an uneasy suspicion that the authorities, though compelled by necessity to accept his gift, would by no means welcome back to the fold a sheep, to their eyes, of so ominous a colour: he suspected that the Head and Committee, together with the Senior Masters, would retire upon their dignity. He was prepared for that, yet a possible lack of clamorous praise might disappoint Sophie and Carlo, and in some vague way chip a little of the glory from his gilded throne of self-importance. But he held the school staff in contempt as an eccentric crew of unworldly despots who knew too much to teach their pupils and in another sense too little. The quadrangle was busy with boys running to their various classrooms. Some stood in groups of twenty or more, beneath the lime trees that formed an avenue down the length of the square, awaiting the arrival of a gowned master, books beneath his arm. Many of them as they passed hurriedly, frankly curious, stared at this group of personified wealth and magnificence. Sophie, a green silk cloak thrown carelessly about her shoulders, her eyes concealed beneath the fringe of gold lace edging her hat, smiled enchantingly at them as they ran by. Many a small boy, incurably romantic as only small boys imagine themselves to be, carried with him, side by side with Loney's *Statics* and his own illegible contributions to science,

that vision of Sophie to console his bored spirit during the next weeks of school, or to form a topic of pseudo-sophisticated criticism for the rest of the term amongst the more worldly of his friends. In truth she was summed up as "a stunner," a "mighty fine woman" (this from a seventeen-year-old Forty-Cap), "a perfect peach," a "damn pretty girl." Carlo, his square body, tightly wedged into a morning coat of amazing cut, topped with a shining top-hat, tipped with radiant spats, was also considered passably well dressed. A certain exaggeration of the super-chic appeals irresistibly to the very young. Smooth hair, fawn socks, and startling waistcoats symbolize pomp of a well-earned kind. To the great only, prefects, members of the XV, and XI's, Caps and other "bloods," can such symbols belong. To the critical minds then of these youthful experts, Sophie, and Carlo must be included, were arrayed such as no Queen of Sheba or the indefinite daughters of Solomon in all their glory might have been. As for Brockenholt, his chief sign of splendour was the monocle that glittered in his left eye, above his beaky nose. Sophie, to their mind, was above question of beauty. Carlo they accepted as something worthy to decorate their quadrangle, but Brockenholt, saturnine, six foot two of him, with an air of rugged handsomeness and nonchalance glimpsed in the passing, lit their imaginations, and they conceived him to be, what in part he was, "the devil of a chap." The only fault they found with him was with the direction of his gift. It was, they considered, a waste of good money to chuck fifteen thousand away in the building of a sanatorium. "Sanny," as it stood, was good enough for them;

one seldom used it, anyway, whereas the racquet courts could do with enlarging and a bit of new turf on the playing fields wouldn't be amiss. An extra week's holiday, or better still an eternal permission to use motor-bikes, was what a chap really needed to make life tolerable. There was, however, a certain recompense in unearthing bewildering legends concerning this remarkable Brockenholt. In studies and dormitories it was of course common knowledge that he'd been "bunked" for keeping five mistresses in the town and drinking champagne in the old Pavilion. He'd led a rebellion that had only just failed because he'd been too drunk to collar the porter before the lodge bell rang warning. They'd looked him up in House collections of old team photos and, with great delight, discovered the "J. Brockenholt" underneath his massive figure, glorious in XV cap and jersey. Any one of them could tell you his life-history and record with a fine disregard for facts. In short, Brockenholt had caught their fancy and sense of the romantic.

The court was clear of boys, and filled with the murmur of settling classes issuing from the multitudinous windows opening on to the square, before the porter, his uniform hurriedly donned, opened the lodge door, and touched his cap.

"Good morning, sir," said he.

"Good morning, porter," said Brockenholt.

"The Master expects me about this time."

The porter examined the card, and sprang to life, a vision of half-crowns and importance prompting him.

"The school, sir," he replied, "is to h'assemble in Hall after last hour. The Master would be

pleased to see you, sir, as soon as you arrive. If you would be so good as to follow me."

The four of them crossed the square, the oval rotundity of the porter swaying majestically before them, entered the grey building at the bottom of the avenue, passed down a dark lengthy corridor and halted before a tall door. The porter tapped twice, coughed, removed his helmet.

"Mr. Brockenholt, if you please, sir."

Sophie laid a hand on Carlo's sleeve.

"Rats," was that gentleman's comment, "'course, we go in too, Sophie. Must see Brock's welcome. Not," he added maliciously, "not that he'll find it roses all the way, I'm thinking."

"He's got the nerve," said Sophie.

It was a long high room in which they found themselves. Narrow windows illuminated it from the far end; white panelling towered to the delicate moulding of the ceiling. A reproduction of the "Dionysus and Ariadne" occupied a prominent position over the red brick fire-place, with its iron fire-dogs. The entire length of the right-hand wall was covered half-way up with a mahogany bookcase. A man in a dark blue suit sat cross-legged on a chair by the window. By a low table at his side, erect, very thin, his grey hair like an open fan behind his head, his knotty hands holding open the side of his coat, stood the Master. They called him "Eagle" in the school. It was an apt name, from the keen deep eyes beneath their tufts of eyebrows, the slight hunch of his back, to the quick sure pouncings of his brain and the talons of his mind. The Reverend Herbert Monckton-Revelle, Master of Marlton College, Fellow of Christ's, author of *Leonardo da*

Vinci, The Life of Tintoretto, The Second Renaissance; man of letters, man of iron, worthy of his name. So they called him "Eagle," feared him, honoured him, some of them — loved him, knowing as needs they must the cool clear knowledge behind that bony forehead, the stern compassion of him, his tough idealism, his old wisdom. And old "Eagle," a gentle smile across his face, his knobbly fingers outstretched, shook Brockenholt by the hand, bowed awkwardly to that blaze of small beauty, Sophie Wontner, nodded to Mr. Carlo Maude.

"Let me introduce," said old "Eagle," "Lord Home, our chairman."

The little man in the blue suit, for all the world like a pouter-pigeon, inclined his head, and sat down again very quickly.

They found seats. The Reverend Monckton-Revelle rumped the harvest of short hair at the back of his head.

"Lord Home, Mr. Brockenholt, has come down to thank you personally for your very generous gift to the school. I, too, would like, on behalf of my colleagues and the present members of Marlton, to express my gratitude."

"Quite!" said Brockenholt, and examined Lord Home with a characteristic upraising of his right eyebrow.

The chairman's face changed from pale pink to purple. Two small wriggling veins appeared beside his temples. He glared back at the mighty director of Lingfields Limited with venom. Sophie, swinging a dainty foot to and fro, lifted an eye in Carlo Maude's direction, where he sat carefully on a high-

backed Chippendale. Mr. Maude stroked his upper lip with a pensive forefinger and stuck his tongue in his cheek on that side of his face nearest to Miss Wontner.

"The building of a new sanatorium will be a very great asset to the school," continued old "Eagle," smiling benignly. "I feel sure, Mr. Brockenholt, that your gift will be appreciated very readily by all old Marltonians."

"I hope so," said Brockenholt. He wasn't going to make it easy for them. Not he! He could give them twenty thousand if he wanted to — but they should sing the tune for it first. Even so, their enthusiasm didn't seem great. The whip was his. They should skip to its lash.

"When will it be ready?" he asked.

The Master turned to some papers on his desk, searched through them.

"Perhaps you would care to look through these," he said.

"They are the various estimates. You will see the building should be completed in a year's time."

"Thanks," said Brockenholt and surveyed the items. He called Maude over to him. Together they nodded and shrugged at figures, plans, details.

"I suppose the darlings get awfully ill, sometimes?" asked Sophie, one slender arm exposed expertly, her fingers resting on the handle of a parasol.

The corners of old "Eagle's" mouth twitched, a hundred little wrinkles creasing the skin; a faint stain of embarrassment glowed beneath his high cheek-bones.

"Occasionally," he answered; "fortunately the place is bracing and it's frequently a matter of influenza or small fractures at games."

"If," said Sophie, smiling sweetly at Lord Home, "if I had a son, I should send him here. I do think the black coats look nice."

The chairman, his feathers already ruffled, and his pouter-pigeon body large with suppressed indignation, opened a round hole of a mouth, and said:

"Ah!"

"Yes, indeed," continued Miss Wontner. "Wouldn't you, Carlo?"

"You bet," agreed Mr. Maude brightly, looking up from the plans.

"You pay us a great compliment," said the pouter-pigeon.

"Not at all," explained Mr. Maude airily. "Not at all." He expanded, feeling chatty. "I expect this place is as good as any other, really. Brock's no credit to it, of course, but then, you're bound to find a mongrel pup or two in a litter."

"Don't be ridiculous, Carlo," said Miss Wontner. "But," she asked old "Eagle," "do you smack the poor little things very often?"

Old "Eagle's" under lip trembled.

"Sometimes, yes. Corporal punishment is still regarded as an essential for the control of boys."

Miss Wontner paused, her head on one side, she seemed to be enjoying a personal visualization. She leant forward, her eyes, innocent, fixed on old "Eagle."

"And when you do smack them, do they have to — to ——"

Mr. Maude guffawed. "Damn good, Sophie.

Ha! Ha! Oh, damn good. No, they keep 'em on! Eh? That's so, sir?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said the chairman, and rose to his feet.

"What's the matter, Carlo?" asked Miss Wontner. "I was going to say, do they have to pretend it doesn't hurt?"

But Mr. Maude shook his head at her.

"Little devil!" he said. "No accounting for women, is there, sir?"

"Apparently not," was Lord Home's reply.

"Anyway, it's all beside the point," continued Miss Wontner. "I don't think I ever shall have a son. One's figure suffers so!"

Brockenholt tossed the papers on to the table.

"Seems all right," he said. "I don't know the architect's name, though."

"That doesn't matter, Brock," Maude chipped in; "the point seems whether the little devils'll get sufficient stabling for their diseased bodies. That's so isn't it?" He cocked his sleek head at the Reverend Monckton-Revelle.

"One gathers that is necessary — Mr.—Mr.——"

"Carlo Maude. You'll find me in *Who's Who*!"

"Doubtless — thank you."

"In that case, then," murmured the chairman.

Old "Eagle" rose to his feet. "In that case, Mr. Brockenholt, we won't detain you any longer. The school will be present in Hall in " — he glanced at the clock — "in half an hour's time. We should be delighted to see you there. Lord Home will tell the boys the exact nature of your generosity, and they will have an opportunity of meeting their benefactor. You know how very sincerely we thank

you for this very substantial help, how grateful we are and how deeply we recognize the sentiment prompting it."

They shook hands again. Outside in the passage Carlo squeezed Sophie's arm.

"What did I tell you?"

"Jimmy," she said, "they don't seem very — impressed!"

"Don't they?" Brockenholt asked, the devil in his eyes.

And the other side of the door, the chairman, his face a mask of contempt, told the Reverend Monckton-Revelle:

"Impossible. The man's a cad."

And old "Eagle," standing before his window, his gnarled hands clasped behind him, his fan of grey hair moving like tall grass in the draught, looked out to where the sunlight beat dazzlingly on to the gravel of the court, where the limes flung cool deep shadows over the squares of grass, and shook his head once or twice.

"No, Home. Not a cad. One must always make allowances." He faced about, his eyes deep with wisdom, the light outlining with gold of the sun his delicate profile.

"I seem to find more and more, Home, the longer I am here that there are always allowances to be made. One learns, one sees, one tries to understand. They grow up, these boys, almost under your hands, like clay, plastic, ripe for the moulding. Sometimes the clay takes goodly shape; sometimes — the potter's hand shakes. One waits, and they return — men. We see then how fares the clay; how chipped; how weathered; how broken.

It's interesting, Home; it's wonderfully interesting, and sometimes — it's very sad!"

"But he was always — *loose!*" said Home.

"So one hears! He was here before my time, of course. They expelled him because of a girl in the town. It was naturally the only thing to do. One must keep the level high. The individual suffers. It's right. But it can be very hard. He hoped to humiliate us, Home — with his money! That's not a thing to be vexed at, I think. To me, it's — tragic. That man's tortured inside for all his brutality. One gets to know the insides of people — boys, men — by constantly watching. He's like a lot of us — on a rack of his own making. He has a long road to go before the beast in him is dead. A lot to lose, Home. A lot to lose."

The chairman sighed deeply.

"You're too good for this world, 'Eagle.' But I don't know what we'd do without you."

But the Reverend Monckton-Revelle shook his head and bent and unbent his fingers till the joints cracked. He regarded the chairman with affection.

"You must make allowances for me too, Home. But it's interesting. Yes, yes. It's interesting."

CHAPTER III

It was nearing half-past twelve. The grandfather clock in the sitting room stammered the quarter. There was an atmosphere of haste, of bustle about the little house on the edge of the Common. Isabel, with the energy of seventeen years, was engaged in brushing her father's coat with one hand, and with the other removing any traces of dust from his soft felt hat by beating it against the umbrella stand. Her mother, adding a further layer of powder to her button nose, called from her bedroom:

"Archie! Archie! Hurry up, do now!"

Archibald Luke, formerly Master of Music at Marlton College, now retired, appeared from his kennel of a study at the rear of the hall and, helpless in shirt sleeves and nickel-plated spectacles, asked plaintively:

"Where is my coat, Madeleine, where *is* my coat?"

His wife, majestic in a fawn coat and skirt with yellow silk facings, swayed across the floor of the bedroom and thrust a mauve and indignant countenance over the banisters.

"I don't know where your coat is, Archie. Don't be a fool. You know how bad it is for my heart."

To all appearances, Mrs. Luke was that unique thing, a perfect complement to her husband, in that her size certainly balanced his lack of height, depth and width, her volubility his dumbness, her vitality his limpness. Unkind people were wont to declare

that Mrs. Luke was not unlike a certain female spider who, incredibly larger than the male, swallows and eats him after his various uses have been accomplished. In one sense, this was true, in another the parallel disappeared. For, certainly, Mr. Luke had at no time been of use to any one, least of all to his employers, and the swallowing of any morsel tends to absorption. Likely enough, Mrs. Luke considered her husband indigestible. Unkind people, however, abound in plenty, and it may have been the questionable success of Mrs. Luke's social enterprises that caused the acidity tainting their behaviour to all of the Luke family — except Isabel. But then, every one adored Isabel.

In many ways the society of Marlton was not unlike that of a garrison town, in that the wives of senior masters might be the temporary and proud possessors of stalls at the quarterly jumble sales and bazaars, while the newly-weds or the juniors, as it were, could only thread their way through a luke-warm unenthusiastic crowd of patrons, with small trays, collecting-boxes for the Marlton Mission, pamphlets, and other such inferior wares. Nobody ever seemed to remember the time when Luke had been on actual service at the College. As far as anybody knew, he'd always been in a state of retirement. Truth to tell, he was an excellent musician with all the vanity and narrowness of his art that left him painfully at the mercy of his pupils, who had turned up for choir practices occasionally and used the music rooms for such immoral purposes as shove-ha'penny parties and penny Nap. Notwithstanding, Mrs. Luke, by dint of sheer weight and impenetrable skin, managed to battle and win a prominent position

in Marlton Society, such as it was. There was a very distinct line of caste drawn between "town" and "college." Somehow Mrs. Luke (the woman had brains) managed to keep a middle course, cultivating the richer town-folk and the poorer "college" wives. She was sure of one thing — "money talks." By this stratagem she was able to divert a considerable sum from the "townites" every year towards the social enterprises of what she termed her "own class." Nobody had ever run with the hare and hunted with the hounds to such a degree of success as Mrs. Luke. But over all she had one priceless possession — Isabel. It is always a wonder of nature how ugly parents frequently produce beautiful children; and Isabel was beautiful, tall and fair and sweet. It is taken for granted that the College adored her from the awe-stricken new boys to the "bloods" of the Upper School. When she sat in chapel hundreds of eyes peeped between fingers at her, they sang their hymns at her, they watched her with dog-like humble worship, they regarded her as something of their own, a communal goddess, to be spoken of with respect and due reverence. She typified that mysterious, wonderful, enthralling thing — woman: the creature none of them had ever been taught about; the thing they must learn for themselves; the first great revelation that should greet their adventuring minds when school gates closed against them for the last time and the world was ripe for discovery. She was the focus of six hundred adolescent first-welling calflives. She was never a *girl* — she was Isabel. They talked about her quite openly to one another. They travelled, in their awakening imagination, long rap-

turous paths with her by their side. They looked very serious when they discussed her; they assumed a nodding worldly-wise, almost paternal, expression. But it never spoilt Isabel. She knew about it quite well. She liked them all. There was safety in numbers. She rivalled Helen in her admirers and ruled them as befitted a queen. She was devoid of undercurrents and subterfuge. She liked admiration and in return kept that fair position in their hearts by declining to recognize any individual attention. Years afterwards, when the old pain was quenched and Brockenholt had killed the beast in him, she would think back, seeing the tall interior of the chapel, its pews lined with those boys' faces; watching again the countless eyes, the bowed heads, the thousand differences of them, their new beauty, their eager hands, wondering what they had found for *their* hearts' comfort, what the middle years had brought to them, and if there were still of mysteries no end and of living further adventuring. Now busily engaged in sorting her father into something resembling a co-ordinate being, her mind was alert with the new excitement of James Brockenholt's arrival. She too had heard much of this dark man with the thousands at his finger-tips, of his power, of his gift, of his — past. Like a shuttlecock his name had been tossed from lip to lip, for the last two months, across the drawing rooms of Marlton. The tides of that society had split against the rock of his reception. A man like that, my dear, to come back. As if we wanted such people! Forcing himself upon us, really. Very generous, of course. Could afford to be? Well, it wasn't everybody who was generous, even when they had money. That

was something. On the other hand, one heard things. . . . Only the other day Mrs. Brayham was saying. . . . You'd heard? Well! But of course the College needed a new sanatorium. A sensible gift. Oh, certainly. Very awkward, though. One wouldn't wish to go into details, but . . . it was a duty.

And Brockenholt had arrived. Mrs. Brayham knew. Of course she did. Didn't Mrs. Brayham always know? It had nearly driven Mrs. Luke to one of her fainting-fits to get the information from Mrs. Brayham. As if any one really cared, anyway, what that woman said! Mrs. Brayham had played with Mrs. Luke like a mouse with a cat. Mrs. Lang-Davies had been there as well. At last the flood of information burst the breakwater of Mrs. Brayham's lips.

"He — er — they are staying at the Marlton Arms."

"The Marlton Arms?"

"Yes — he — er — they."

"*They?*"

"I'm afraid so."

Old Mrs. Lang-Davies had rustled her skirt and sighed deeply. Dear me, dear me. It was no business of hers, but it was a pity. So unnecessary.

"Tell me, dear," cooed Mrs. Luke.

"There's very little to tell," lied Mrs. Brayham, feeling like a retired Secret Service official selling his Life and Memoirs to the *Daily Mail*.

"Is — is she ——?" ventured Mrs. Luke.

"Very pretty," replied Mrs. Brayham. "One doesn't know, of course, but she's beautifully dressed. Her clothes must have cost a fortune."

"And he?"

"Which one?"

"*Two* of them?"

"Well, a friend, I believe. Mr. — er, Mr. — Brockenholt — how curiously that name sticks in the throat — Mr. Brockenholt is extremely handsome."

"Ah!"

"He looks, well, one might say, a — dare-devil."

"No — indeed?"

"I can't help thinking," continued Mrs. Brayham, "that it is a great mistake the College accepting his gift; it puts one in a false position. One cannot afford to take a firm stand. There are so many people ——"

"Of course," said Mrs. Luke, "of course, one never quite knows where one is, does one?"

"I do feel, though, it's very unfortunate. Mr. Brayham cannot see my point of view. But then men always feel bound to defend other men. But we women should — er — stand together."

"Most decidedly," agreed Mrs. Luke. "Quite right."

Old Mrs. Lang-Davies had gone then. She told her husband afterwards.

"Such a to-do, dear. It's really too absurd. I feel sorry for this poor man. He'll be like a shrimp among the sharks."

Lang-Davies, who had tried to teach Brockenholt the rudiments of Physics some twenty years before, the only remaining master in the school who had dealt with him personally, gave a chirping chuckle.

"Not he! I can't remember much about him. But he'll scatter the sharks. He's a bad man, of course, from our standards. But bless my heart,

I'd rather have 'em bad and bright than dull and good."

And now the great day had come! At twelve-thirty Mr. James Brockenholt would be present in Hall. Invitations had been issued. They had all been accepted. "One ought to go, of course," said Mrs. Luke. Of course one ought to, apart from the vulgar instinct of curiosity. She meant to say, one couldn't be curious when one knew so much, could one? No, Isabel mustn't hear. She wouldn't understand.

"Where is my coat?" wailed Mr. Luke.

"It's here, daddy. No, the other arm! Now! And have you got a handkerchief?"

"I *had*," said Mr. Luke pathetically. "I *had*."

His wife came down the stairs, waving the missing requisite in her hand.

"You left it in my room. Why, Archie, must you always keep us waiting?"

"I lost my coat," said Mr. Luke.

"Rubbish," replied that lady, and led the way down the garden path.

Already a thin stream of visitors was progressing down the high-street towards Turner's Lane. As the Lukes turned the corner by Tucker's, Mrs. Brayham and the new Lower School Master joined them. Notwithstanding her disapproval of the forthcoming ceremony, Mrs. Brayham had fought her way into that especial buff tussore reserved for occasions of dignity and pomp. The new master, full of fear that he would reach Common Room too late to secure his gown in time for an early entry into Hall, bobbed by Mrs. Luke's side like a tug in attendance to a ship of war. Luke, Isabel at his

side, wandered behind dismally. Every now and then he would snatch his hat from his head and blink behind his spectacles with amazing rapidity, this signifying recognition of some persons known or unknown. As they entered the school gates, Hall bell began to clang, and the school, some six hundred and fifty strong, struggled savagely for seats on the tables and forms, for no other reason than for fair fighting's sake. At the far end of the building, on the raised dais reserved for prefects and the Master at meal times, and behind the long table were ranged seven chairs. Two wings of twenty or so more chairs were in semicircular position at the extremities of the platform. An observer of this typical scene might have discovered a somewhat similar battle being developed for the seats on the dais reserved for the staff and their womenkind and visitors. Whereas one small boy spoke forcibly to another small boy in this wise:

"Do you want the whole place to yourself? Get your feet down." So on the other hand Mrs. Brayham asked Mrs. Luke:

"I wonder how we are supposed to sit — by *seniority*, I should think, Mrs. Luke, wouldn't you?"

Which after all was saying the same thing in an even more forcible way.

In the course of five minutes the great building was full. A roar of smothered conversation filled it. Six hundred and fifty faces were turned towards the dais: from that position of austerity, thirty faces were turned impassively towards the assembled school. Soon the Master, Lord Home, four senior masters and the great man himself would arrive. You could hear tags of the universal conjecturing,

flapping out like birds from the middle-mist of the general hubbub.

A boy's shrill voice: "This place is bagged! Oh, get out! Old Eagle's narked. Saw him crossing Court. The girl's a peach! . . . seen him? Bet your life. The other chap's a bounder!" Mrs. Brayham whispering: "How *do* you do. Yes, he's better, thanks. Pleurisy. *So* trying. I quite agree with you, but so difficult to — er — take a stand. Of course, but then the Master always will have his own way." Mrs. Luke vibrating: "I told my husband, Archie, we must remember our position! Pull your chair in, Archie. Isabel, your blouse, dear. No, the top button. You're quite right, abominably managed. One would have thought the Bursar . . ."

The bell ringing again, sudden silence, scraping of feet, then the waves of word-laden air breaking against the bleak walls again. Louder now; somebody laughing in the middle of Hall. A master's voice: "Keep quiet there." Eyes, eyes, hundreds of them, ranging from face to face, all in one direction now, towards the great door with the sun beating through it. The hiss of expectation. . . . Ah!

There they were! Old "Eagle" first, his gown crooked over his shoulders, his head thrust forward, silencing the whole assembly with a threatening of his chin. Lord Home next. Brockenholt beside him, his monocle glittering, a sneer twisted across his mouth like a painted grin, sure of himself, well in hand, with that air of power, of bigness beyond his mere bulk warping even old "Eagle." A group of masters, a sombre group, dignified, black-gowned, wobbling along behind, with a flower in their midst — Sophie! "Yes! that's the girl! What's *she*

coming for? Do *look* at her, Mrs. Lang-Davies! Outrageous." Every one standing up, tongues in leash. "You're on my ruddy feet. I told you she was a peach. You're coarse!"

They still remember that morning in the school. It was the first skirmish successfully encountered by Mrs. Luke in that long tribal war for precedence when she made Isabel give up her seat to Miss Wontner, whose presence had not been expected. "Pray sit here, my daughter can stand quite well. Isabel . . . dear." Miss Wontner, flicking a glance over the scandalized wives and their breadwinners, "Thank you so much," and sank down on the high-backed chair with a sure knowledge that the height of the dais would provide the school with a length of slender silken leg that should render the ceremony less boring for them. It did. And Isabel, just behind Sophie, looked down on that living flame of hair, burning through the net of lace of the green and gold hat, saw the polished beauty of Sophie's hands, the space of dead white lovely flesh of her bare neck, with the jade necklace riding it, gathered the entirety of her professional beauty to herself, and suddenly felt ashamed, standing there behind this costly treasured thing, feeling immediately the stupid inadequacy of her white blouse and pleated cream skirt and white straw hat with the thread of green leaves round the brim, and thought, "Oh! isn't she beautiful! Isn't she beautiful!" which was generous, and just like Isabel. But Brockenholt, three chairs to the left, twisting round to scorch the eyes probing his back, the twenty or more inquisitive injured eyes, caught sight of the white blouse and thin seventeen-year-old arms, and felt again,

on the recognition of the girl in the window, a stab of pain that brought back to him at once all those queer haunting hunger-pangs, for whose satisfying he knew no food of heart or soul could at present be found. But Isabel, unaware of those quick eyes flashing over her, stood tall and proud and miserable behind Miss Wontner, wondering if she could make a hat like that with a bit of net and a handful of lace. But when it came later for Brockenholt to reply, to make his short speech, the absurd thought of that pathetic being in the white blouse behind his mistress's chair being hurt by the bitter quiet things he had to say, had meant to say, somehow made him, to his own surprise, snap the arrows of his old bitterness, and speak simply and generously, leaning over his chair, turning now and again with his brilliant and captivating smile to old "Eagle" or Lord Home and the men beside him, his eyes mocking good-naturedly the sea of faces of the school before him. This was the sort of chap, the school thought. None of your pomposity. One of themselves, out for a rag, equal to old "Eagle," a sportsman. And when he sat down they stamped and clapped and bellowed. In Court afterwards they surged about him, and, completely at home, sure, he pushed his way amongst them as unselfconscious as any of them.

But Mrs. Luke, dabbing fretfully at her overheated forehead, smiled in the approved Marlton fashion upon Miss Wontner who had thanked her for the chair.

"Not at all. Not at all. One's only too pleased as a connection of the College to assist a visitor in any way."

They'd accepted Brockenholt — the school had accepted him. He'd behaved most admirably. After all, one never knew, did one? Of course, Mrs. Brayham would take her standpoint. Nevertheless the tide had turned for the time being. It was a chance.

"My husband, Mrs. — er — Mrs. ——"

"Miss Wontner."

"Of course. How names slip from one's memory, do they not? My husband held a responsible position for many years as Master of Music in the College. If you are staying down here Miss — er, Miss Wontner, perhaps one afternoon — for tea — our house is ridiculously small — but — and if Mr. Brockenholt and Mr. — Mr. ——"

"Maude."

"Ah! yes! Mr. Maude — cared to — four o'clock, you know."

Would she? Would she? and Sophie, wickedly innocent:

"But of course, how nice of you."

"Not at all. Not at all. Most delighted," and Mrs. Luke, having explained the geography of her domain, swept from the hall, her husband trailing behind, and Isabel with her arm through his, whistling beneath her breath, as it were, that extremely popular song:

"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming. . ."

Mrs. Brayham meeting Mrs. Luke at the gates, remarked:

"I see you were caught! I feared so! So obvious, I do declare. As if we wish to know her. I'm glad to think we still have our pride and can keep ourselves to ourselves."

"She was merely thanking me for Isabel's chair," said Mrs. Luke.

"Creature!" was Mrs. Brayham's reply.

But Mrs. Luke said nothing. She was one up.

And at lunch, Miss Wontner, after two cocktails and a kiss from James Brockenholt, told him:

"We really must go, Jimmy. It'll be too damn funny for words."

"If her mind's as broad as her body," said Mr. Carlo Maude, "we might progress well. The daughter's pretty. A chip off somebody else's block, I suppose."

But Brockenholt only scowled in answer.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER lunch he went for a walk by himself. Sophie and Carlo were frankly bored. In desperation they had taken the car and gone out for the afternoon.

"We'll see," Carlo had said, "if there's any limit to the grass surrounding this blessed town. I'm sick of the sight of it already."

"What are you going to do, Jimmy; coming too?"

"No."

"Very well. Only don't be maudlin at dinner."

Now he was on the road that led to the Forest. He chose that deep hidden place of trees like a wounded animal. With the gnarled trunks and dense foliage surrounding him, he would find solitude fit for his mood. There he could think. There he could be that other person roused again so abruptly into life. The moment he was alone that other personality was uppermost. With Sophie and Carlo his mind was occupied with the thoughts of his usual world, the world of sophistication and reality: with himself only, he was back among his memories.

It is the memory of the years before the boy becomes man, the budding time, when the promise of power to come is bright, with the first realization of self, that lasts longest. Then the things of living are new and very wonderful; facts and illusion are in constant conflict, there are roads to step with first wonder beyond the crest of each hill. The smallest

of spoken words hold glamour, the ordinary action is pregnant with significance. Year by year the middle-aged, the old men, return to the green circuit of Lords and the posted football ground at Twickenham. In their hundreds they come, to wave their sticks, to crack their voices. Their time has slipped away. But there was a time, yes, there was a time, they tell you in the train, when men could tackle and drop and run, when fellows didn't have any use for soft games, and when cricket was something like cricket. The young men sit and listen and smirk contentedly. They know the old men are rather futile and rather indecently excited. They nod and agree and add a necessary courtesy by the use of the all-covering epithet "sir." They think the old men a little silly. But in time they too will gossip in the train and search in the memories for the greater episodes, when Oxford crossed the line in the last two minutes, when England won by an inning and eighteen runs. Year by year the games are won, year by year in their thousands the old men cheer and lose their heads. Once or twice in the twelve-month they come to refresh their minds with their own lost youth. They can do what they like for that short time, they can lose restraint and rub shoulders with youth. It is the old man's day. They drink greedily of the fountain and for a time are refreshed.

So it was with Brockenholt, tramping the dusky forest corridors, re-living the former years, the bonds of which are very strong, whose memory dies not. And making his way in this unpeopled place he sought to examine his recovered individuality by his usual self. What had happened this morning in

Hall? Where had been those ironic things he had meant to say? Why, against his inclination, had he been generous in his words? Had that girl in the white blouse, with the sweet face and skinny arms been the cause of that emotion? From sight of her had come that renunciation. He could make no accounting for it. It wasn't what Sophie would have called "softness." It wasn't that. He didn't know this slip of a girl: he didn't care for her. Didn't care for her. She was just a pretty girl. But she wasn't only pretty! If she was lovely, then Sophie was lovely too. Whence came this ridiculous sense of her presence, the sense of her innocence. Was it that? Innocency? A white frail dove of a thing, of a thought, winging out of the dark, brushing with white wings across his vision of things? Wings of innocence: white frail wings that promised new discovery along a path of light, hitherto unexplored? Had he heard the beat of them before, caught sight before of such a pilgrim speeding the darkness? Had he? Had he? In those old unhappy days of adolescence before he'd stood on the station with his luggage that last day, that day of expulsion? Were there wings of such sort, in his thoughts, of that damned tobacco-girl? Will-o'-the-wisp of dreams, pale beckoning of the gleam. Denied — denied. "I cried for bread," he thought, "they gave me stones." And stones were hard, and he was hard: stones for a road to tread, but bread for hunger and the empty times. But the beast in him, that other ravenous creature of desire, yet unsatiated, long years yet from death, rose in rebellion, and he laughed to think a girl in a loose blouse and a cheap straw hat could hold his thoughts so long. Yet

there were ways with women, his way, Carlo's way. One had the experience. One knew. But then again that thought jolted him suddenly calm. He didn't want her — that way! *Want* her? What was he talking about now? *He* didn't want her. Good God, no. He was only — hungry!

He walked on steadily. The movement seemed to clarify his mind. He walked fast, almost as if he was running from something that haunted him. There seemed no solution to this puzzle of what had happened to him. But he never before had allowed outside occurrences to direct him. He had carved his own way through life, with on occasions an almost cruel disregard of himself. He believed that he could direct his course. So far that belief had been justified. Now he was faced with some obscure difficulty. The first step, he decided, was to realize the nature of that difficulty. Things he had laughed at before now assumed a very real importance. Yet, on the other hand, he could still laugh at them. It was ridiculous to think that a girl in a dowdy blouse could influence him, but certainly that was the only reason he could imagine for his attitude of the morning. Perhaps it was not so much the girl herself as his idea of her! Yes, that was getting nearer the truth. She symbolized something, and that something must, by reason of its intensity of desire, be worthy of consideration. What was it? To consider that he must forget his ordinary self, and let this new self have full expression. What was it? A sense of intrigue? Good God, no, that was grotesque. A sense of her innocence? Perhaps, but it was more than that. Of her very obvious youth? Yes! He stopped at the thought

and fumbled in his pocket for a pipe. He stuffed the tobacco into the bowl carefully. Yes, her youth. He'd seen her at the window that first night, when he'd been troubled a little, before his feelings had risen to this pitch. He'd wondered then what it was that had made her seem so fey, so remote. Now he knew. Well, then, if under the circumstances he felt interested in her — of course only that — didn't that point to a tendency within himself? Wasn't there a small craving within him to be young again? But how old was he? Thirty-eight. Generally speaking, he was young. He lit the pipe, drawing at it steadily. His argument had circled back to its beginning, unless — unless there were qualities, degrees of youth! To go further, how young did he want to be? Yes, that was the real question. But one thing he knew now, could therefore, if necessary, combat: his return to this place so filled with recollection and amazingly poignant vivid recollection at that, had, as it were, split him in two. With Sophie he was James Brockenholt; alone with himself and the vision of the girl at her window or in her white blouse, he was Black Brockenholt of eighteen. If that was so, which personality did he wish to assume, which was himself?

And in a simple manner that decision was made, and from that moment the whole trend of his life was changed; that long conflict within him started, that long battle whose losses in years to come seemed gain.

He walked back to the town, contented now that the first difficulty was recognized for what it was. The exercise had done him good; it had been a long time since he had experienced that deli-

cious sensation of physical energy satisfied. He was a little warm, a little tired. His blood freely circulating excited his brain. Familiar landmarks awoke half-forgotten episodes. At the edge of the wood he looked down on the town beneath. The school buildings clustered together behind the screen of the stately elms. The open-air swimming bath was a bronze and silver sickle amongst the trees. Gentle swaying pillars of grey smoke issued from the red brick chimneys, and above five pigeons wheeled and slanted downwards. Beyond tier on tier the playing-fields rose, little green tablelands dotted with white figures. Now and again, through the quiet and mellow air, he could hear the elastic crack of bat meeting ball; subdued shoutings, the murmur of that boyish business over the grass. Still farther the downs stretched away. He watched the cloud-shadows sweep across this country of low hills and gentle valleys, this land scooped as it were by the dragging of the Maker's fingers across a green-grey plateau, where little stunted trees, with backs to the wind, grip the light soil with tenacious roots; he saw the sarcen stones starring the down's ancient shoulders and in places gathered in the hollows like old grey women; more distant still, like some solitary high temple worshipped by no hands but those of the shadows, the Four Mile Clump stabbed skywards, its trees atop harp-strings for the wind's delight; grey in the evening sun the sheep ranged the slopes, and around all, the mighty scarred buttresses of Hackpen, Martinsell and Barbary Castle kept inviolate the sanctity of the downs.

Walled within this magic circle of the hills he again, beyond himself, took part in those affairs

within his vision. Now once more he was fielding in the sun or buckling his pads on to bat; or he was poised on a spring-board above the translucent tempting surface of the swimming pool; he was crossing the Court, his arms laden with buns; or trudging down town to devour ices. They came to him, those ghosts, tugging at his sleeve, peering up into his face; ghosts of his different selves that had been, ghosts of his laughters, ghosts of his tears. Who shall gainsay such visitants — memories like snatches of song, arising suddenly in the mind, and not to be refused? When the last night tops the hills and the day climbs no more to the zenith, do they come again, those fragile ghosts of things done, and wait for the last outgoing tremendous breath and the eyes' last reproachful regard, saying, "We are your tears. We are the ghosts of tears. And we will plead for you!" So at the end, when limbs that have stepped their thousand ways drown in the slumberous depths, ghosts of those dead selves may rise not against, but for, us, interceding, pleading for permission sometimes, but sometimes only, to return to the places of carnate life and the cruel dear things of earth.

They came then to Brockenholt in exquisite torture. He was glad, yes, mighty glad, Sophie wasn't with him. What woman could understand these passionate memories, how strongly, how strangely those ghostly hands touched his heart? I wish I were back again, he thought; I wish I were one of those little distant marionettes in white, my whole being intensified by the grip of my hands on a bat handle. I wish I could go back. I wish I could have another chance.

But the very mention of Sophie's name amid such thoughts made him feel self-conscious. I'm being an ass, he thought, I'm getting — "soft." But the desire to live a little longer amidst this new yet old existence prompted him to descend the hill rapidly and make his way to the school itself. This, he decided, as he entered the gates, shall be the last time I indulge myself. The quadrangle was deserted, the classrooms empty. As he passed the lodge the porter, spying through the window, remembering the pound note rewarding his services of the morning, dived frantically for his coat and helmet. He caught up with Brockenholt in the middle of Court.

"You'll be wishing to see round the College, sir?" he asked. Brockenholt glared at him. "Of course, sir, if" He fidgeted under Brockenholt's steady regard.

"In your hurry, porter," Brockenholt said at last, "you have loosened a button on your tunic." The porter glanced down at his prosperous frontage. The button was hanging by a thread. "I am philosophical this afternoon, porter."

"Yes, sir!"

"In ordinary circumstances, porter, I should commit you to everlasting flame. I realize your intentions are admirable. You have a sense of self-preservation, symbolized by ——" he held out half a crown. "That will repay you for your trouble."

"Thank you kindly, sir."

"And now," said Brockenholt, his sneer across his face, "having fulfilled my side of the bargain, I'm entitled to a final sentiment, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, porter, go to hell."

"Certainly, sir," said the porter, and retired to the cup of tea his wife was preparing in the back room of the lodge.

"He ain't half a queer one!" he told his wife as she stirred his three lumps of sugar into the brackish brew. "He's a one, he is, and no mistake!"

"That's as may be!" said Mrs. Porter. "He's 'andsome enough for two."

"Ho, you wimmen," said the porter, which shows that he too was something of a philosopher.

But as the porter's throat glowed gratefully with the tea, Brockenholt passed through the arches of the left side of the Court and looked about him. Directly before him was the door of a classroom. He rattled the door-knob and entered. Good God, but the memories were stronger than ever in this whitewashed room, with its rows of oaken, chipped desks. It was almost identically the same. He moved across to where a long narrow desk stood by the wall. It was then he made the discovery. Carved in the centre were the straggling initials "J. B." Somebody else's handiwork was scratched across them, but the token was clearly visible. It was the concrete seal set to his memories. And suddenly he realized that at this desk, twenty or so years back, he'd sat digging away with a pen-knife, probably under the cover of a piece of blotting paper. Yes! that was exactly how he had perpetrated this carving for immortality. It all came back . . . the crowded room . . . the murmur of voices . . . the master's black gown and barking voice. . . . Lord, Lord, how vivid! But disastrously he realized, more important still, the

poignant fact that never again could he sit and carve surreptitiously. It had taken a week to complete the initials. It had been a boy's prank. A boy's! And now, now he was thirty-eight, he was a man. Never before had he thought of the possibility of age overtaking *him*. Now he knew it would, in twenty, thirty years' time. But the score of the years was irrelevant: it was the sudden amazing realization that counted. The boy was dead, the man was man. But the school itself was so young: it was the only thing he could think of, untouched spiritually by the progress of time. Fifty years ahead, boys' laughter would still echo in Court, boys' footsteps still clatter down corridors: there would be shouts and angers and lamentations a hundred years ahead, all young, all new. Masters would die, trees would grow old and branches be lopped away; new bricks would strengthen the then worn masonry; fresh gravel would be scattered across the quadrangle; but the place itself would know no change. Its life would always be young. When I'm old, he thought, there will be only this place still youthful. We live, we die, we are forgotten. Only this thirty acres knows the secret of the first years. It can never die. It can never really grow old. With that knowledge came that other terrible revelation, he himself could never be eighteen again. Even the ticking of his wrist-watch seemed ominous, counting away the seconds of this very time of maturity, ticking away his life, everybody's life. He'd lived those previous years too fully, too busily to realize before how inevitably the thing must come to pass. He must recapture something of that early time before it was too late. And

he was hungry. But now he knew what bread would satisfy that desire — youth. And there flashed before him strangely enough a vision of a white blouse and thin seventeen-year-old arms; a window lit in the night, a halo of soft hair, two hands on a sill, and eyes turned to the distant ridge of Barbary.

And from across the Court there came the jiggling tuneful tune of:

*“ Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming,
Stars a-dreaming,
Oh, I want cher, Yes! I want cher!”*

To his horror and disgust he found his eyes smarting. Damn it, he thought, I must get out of this — quick! And he was more glad than ever that Sophie wasn't with him.

But before he left he put his head inside the door of the lodge.

“ Porter.”

There was a scrambling and bumping in the room at the back of the house.

“ Yes, sir.”

“ You took my remark in the right way, you know ——”

“ Why of *course*, sir.”

“ Good evening, porter!”

“ Good evening to you, sir.”

In the kitchen Mrs. Porter banged the teacups into their respective places on the sideboard.

“ Ho! You men!” she said.

CHAPTER V

THAT night, in the billiard-room of the Marlton Arms, while Brockenholt chalked his cue and Sophie reached across the table to make another of her miraculous misses, Carlo Maude asked:

"Find the haunts of your misspent youth intriguing this afternoon, Brock?"

"I did," said Brockenholt shortly, and turned to flick the pointer on the score-board.

"It seems to me," mused Carlo, "that the difference between a public-house and a public school is that whereas in the former the thing imbibed passes, in the latter the thing imbibed remains as a source for chronic and mental indigestion."

"Oh yes!" said Brockenholt. "Good God, she's missed again! Sophie, joy of my heart, you put the wrong side on."

"These balls," replied Miss Wontner, "are decidedly square. I defy any one to make more than fifteen on this miniature alpine range."

Whereupon Brockenholt made a break of thirty. But as he moved about the table, Sophie by his side, Carlo, his lips pressed together and scratching his cheek with a stubby forefinger, considered deeply. Now what had happened to Brock? Where had been all those fine slaps he'd promised to deliver in his speech? Why this morning had he spoken as he had? He had collapsed like a pricked balloon. Decidedly something had happened. Was it possible there was a chink in the seemingly impregnable armour of James Brocken-

holt? A weakness that could be used? It was too obvious and long lasting a mood to be caused solely by the return to this dingy hole of a place.

And then Sophie asked:

"When are we going to tea with Mrs. Rumble-Dumble?"

"Who?"

"The old cat who sat next to me this morning."

"I don't know."

Ah! Brock had missed that shot. It was an easy shot too, the sort he always brought off.

"You don't generally miss those, Brock!"

"Don't I?"

No, thought Carlo, you don't. Now I wonder.

"The daughter gave up her chair to you, didn't she, Sophie? Nice of her, I thought. Nice girl too in her way. Where do they live?"

"Your turn, Carlo," said Brockenholt. "Get on with it."

"Ah! yes," said Mr. Maude. "My shot." He miscued purposely. He must follow this trail at once. "Nice girl! Didn't you think so, Brock?"

"I didn't see her!"

"No?"

Well, then why was it Brock's eyes had lit up so keenly when he'd caught sight of that white blouse behind Sophie's chair? Oh yes, he'd seen that, had Carlo. There were few things he didn't see. The game of watching was a fine art to Mr. Maude. So perhaps, after all, Brock's preoccupation was caused by the very obvious. Well, well.

"I thought she was a nice girl," said Carlo. "A pretty girl, though dowdy, of course. I shall cultivate her."

"Good luck to you, then," was Brockenholt's reply.

But later, sitting on the edge of his bed, Carlo, one foot in his pyjamas, a cigarette in one hand, pondered deeply. He sat there for perhaps ten minutes or so till the cigarette was burnt low. As eventually he pulled on his pyjamas he seemed to be enjoying, judging by the grin across his face, a very good joke with himself. From down the passage Sophie's voice rang out:

"Night-night, everybody."

The grin left Carlo's lips. He tapped his teeth with his thumbnail. If that was the case, then he wouldn't be surprised . . . no, he wouldn't be a bit surprised if, after all — with a little tact, a little care . . .

"Night-night, everybody."

"Nigh-to, Sophie."

Outside the moon rose high and white in the wide sky, staring down on to the huddle of roofs of the little town. In one room, curled up like a kitten, Sophie slept soundly and immediately. At one end of the passage Brockenholt lay upon his back in the darkness, gazing at the light of a street lamp pale yellow on the ceiling, seeing the moonlight cut the room into a chequered pattern, white and black, black as pitch — white as — as a white silk . . . blouse?

At the other end of the passage did Mr. Maude sleep or did he too lie awake? Did the darkness quite conceal the grin on his face, or perhaps there was no grin at all, but only the distortion of the moonlight? Or perhaps he slept?

CHAPTER VI

FROM her bedroom window Isabel could see the height of Barbary Castle, seven miles away, a wedge of intenser darkness, jutting into the first deep moonless phase of the night. She never went to bed without sitting for a few minutes before the window and reading the downs. At this magic hour those empty grassland spaces seemed written over with romances far more alluring than those to be found in books. At least she thought so. The road to Hackpen slid past beneath, threading its journey across the ridges to where it rose abruptly to mount the Hackpen Hill, then it dropped sheer to the next great ledge of the country. True, in broad daylight the road ran past Hackpen, on to Wooton Bassington, through Wooton Mary, and curved into Swindon thirty miles away. Even then it continued to other busy places, black with people, brutal with noise of them and their doings. An ordinary road, used ordinarily — in daytime. Oh, she knew that well enough. But at night, when the moon climbed and the stars pin-pricked the night's ceiling, when the sheep-bells tinkled drowsily and the grass and stunted bushes slept, there came no motors along the road, no carts, no hurrying footsteps, only a great silence heralding the everlasting tramp of imaginary creatures, and the road that ran in daylight, as all roads to destinations, then stopped short at the bluff of Hackpen: left the bonds of earth and soared into the sky. It was her

especial road, thronged at this hour with kings of her fantasy.

It had been a scrambling sort of a week. She'd seen the great man four days ago in Hall, and afterwards thrice in the street. It was true, he was awfully thrilling. She'd not been able to see his face when he spoke to the school in Hall, but she'd seen the response on the hundreds of other faces, listening. Down town she'd only caught sight of his broad square back. Her subjects had accepted him. It must be exciting to be as bad as he was. That was a funny thing, how nice a certain sort of wickedness was. But perhaps it wasn't so nice when you knew the details of it: only exhilarating in theory, perhaps? You'd always learnt that as the bay-tree, the wicked flourish. Well, you'd got to accept that, of course. But perhaps he wasn't so terribly wicked, when you knew him. What were the sort of things he did? Perhaps he cheated people and that was why he was so enormously rich, or ill-treated his servants and employees. He looked relentless enough to do either of those things. But if that was true then he'd be in prison. Everybody seemed to know so much about him and she was the only one in ignorance. Mother was very secretive. She'd asked her:

"Why is every one making such a fuss, Mum?"

"He's not the sort of person that respectable people know."

"Why? What's he done?"

And mother had drawn her lips together and:

"He was *expelled*!"

Expelled! What for? She hadn't liked to

question further. When Mum looked like that it meant you had to shut up. You mustn't ever worry Mum, because her heart was so awfully wobbly and uncertain, like an old clock, she supposed. But — *expelled!* That was terrible but she wanted details. One could guess all sorts of things but that was much worse than knowing. Why wouldn't people tell you things? There were a lot of mysteries. One knew all about children and that sort of thing in a hazy way. That was a part of love, a part of marriage. A jolly part, to have little children who looked like you, whom you kept warm and close and comforted before they were born and washed and loved for ever afterwards. That was beautiful. But somehow there was something that could be wrong about even that. There were a whole set of rules governing the procedure. It was just because people wouldn't tell you what you wanted to know that beastly misgivings came to you sometimes. You didn't marry till you loved some one very much. She supposed Mum and Dad loved each other: they were married. But they didn't kiss each other and in a queer way they were strangers to one another. Sometimes they quarrelled, and it was horrid. As for Brockenholt . . . what was the quality of his wickedness? Even the Ten Commandments left you still guessing, and they were supposed to cover the gamut of sin. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is his." Covet meant hankering after. She'd broken that Commandment today. Miss Wontner's hat! She mustn't think about net and lace

and ribbon any more. If you went on thinking, you went on sinning. Did Brockenholt covet things? Very likely. But what? His neighbour's house or wife? Silly! His servant, his maid, his ox, or his ass? It really was rather funny. If Brockenholt coveted the last two items! How awfully difficult it must be for farmers . . . stop that line of thought! "Thou shalt not steal . . . murder . . . commit adultery." What precisely was that? The last? They were always being suggestive about marriage. It was indelicate. It was full of shame. It offended her. Why couldn't they leave people alone and let them just be happy. Everything else seemed happy, like she herself was. Trees and little birds and urchins: sheep on the downs, dragon-flies — even wasps, in their own irritating way. They must have been very bad — all Brockenholts? — those Israelites to make God give Moses such a terrible iron set of rules for people to follow. Unless they chose to go to hell; and that would be terrible, to go to hell, because there wouldn't be any Barbary Castles there, or strange trees perched up into the sky from a hill-top, or knock-kneed lambs in spring, or the touch of rain and the wind's shouting. There wouldn't even be a road to walk in dreams. Why didn't people explain?

But she felt tired of asking herself all these questions. Outside the road gleamed white in the young moon's rising radiance. There was a scrabbly noise outside in the passage, which meant Dad was going to bed; in a few minutes Mum would come up — you always knew which was Mum by the way the stairs creaked. She'd have to jump into bed then and put the light out. Mum was

frightened of candles, and she mustn't do anything that would be bad for that pumping heart. But she'd play Romans tonight. She'd look down on the road and wait, wait. Soon would come the distant rhythmic tramp of marching feet, swinging down the road, tramp, tramp, tramp. Out of the dark they'd come four abreast, their spears smiting high, their kilts swaying, their harness rattling. Voices foreign and harsh, subdued, would croak down that swinging column, hoofs would patter, and the Roman Eagle, proud, aloft, dancing along in front. Sometimes they would sing, drenching the air with their song's steadfast beating, marching into the darkness, out of the sky, past her window, soldiers of dreams.

And while Isabel waited at her window, Miss Wontner, a cigarette burning close to her lips, her eyes half-shut behind the whorls of smoke, sitting in the porch of the Marlton Arms, tugged at James Brockenholt's coat-tail as he moved past her and asked:

"Now where in the world are you off to, Jimmy?"

But he jerked her fingers free and left her.

Therefore Miss Wontner returned indoors and suggested to Mr. Carlo Maude that a walk over the downs might be as good a way as any other of spending an evening in a place as skittish as a negro's corpse. To this Mr. Maude agreed. It was not often that he had the opportunity of Sophie's company alone. Brockenholt saw to that. Brockenholt saw to too much, to Mr. Maude's way of thinking. There'd come a time, though . . . Maude could wait for that. It was a bad mistake

ever to lay your cards on the table: the art of existence was in holding up your hand, watching, waiting. . . .

Said Miss Wontner, as they skirted the Common — Carlo had chosen to go this way, “Better view,” he’d told her — and walked side by side through the moonlight:

“How long are we going to stay down here, Carlo? We’ve been here a week already.”

He lit a cigarette before replying, cautiously:

“I haven’t asked Brock!” And then, “One hasn’t seen much of him, eh?”

“But what’s Jimmy got to do with it?”

“Everything — as usual.”

“Poor old Carlo!” she murmured, and slipped a hand through his arm. He looked down at her, trying to catch sight of the expression on her face. “Poor old Carlo!” coming from Sophie might mean anything. They walked on in silence. There’s just the chance, he was thinking. The house is at the far edge of the common, isn’t it? If his surmises were correct, there should be plenty of fun when the fireworks went up. But there was no telling what Sophie might know, might be thinking. Meanwhile, a preparing of the ground might not be amiss.

“I’ve found a new flat,” he told her.

She nodded her head, and still he couldn’t see her face in the dark, beneath the brim of her hat.

“It’s a nice little place. Sermyn Street. I’m still settling in. When we get back you’ll have to come round and see it. I’d like your advice.”

That was a false step. The hat brim lifted up for a second and then dropped again. So he wanted her advice, did he? That was the most curious thing

about Carlo — his taste. It was most excellent, he had an eye for intrinsic values. Even high prices didn't influence that incongruous and real appreciation of things for themselves. Everything about him was immaculate; the Jew in him? And Carlo wanted her advice. That was ridiculous. But she answered:

"That would be nice, Carlo."

"I hope you'll come often," he said.

"As often as I can."

Silence again. I'll drop that lead, he thought, and try again. They were now on the Wooton and Bassington Road, the downs on either side, the moon high.

"How long have you known Jimmy?" he asked suddenly.

"What? Oh, Jimmy? 'Bout five years."

"And how long are you going to know him?" he wanted to ask but instead: "It's a long time."

"I suppose it is!"

"Lingfields is doing well. It's like Brock, to make a success of everything."

"He's clever enough."

"Um."

No good either. He'd try a frontal attack. It would hold the element of surprise. She wouldn't expect it.

"What's wrong with Brock?"

He felt her arm against his give a quick jerk, an abrupt tension of the fingers on his sleeve. Ah! that had found its mark. He must follow it up.

"He's upset about something, I think," he continued. "You've noticed him lately? I suppose coming back has its disadvantages, especially when

the cheers aren't quite so loud as anticipated. Still, what else could he expect? I thought we were going to have an amusing time down here, didn't you? Instead Brock growls his way through each day and then disappears for hours at a time at night. Where's he gone?"

"I don't know, how should I?"

Irritation in that response. She was vexed, then. Probably she *didn't* know where he'd gone. Could she guess?

"Oh, well! I thought you might. He tells you most things."

"Don't be absurd, Carlo. He never tells me anything. Why should he?"

"I don't know, my dear girl. I don't care where he goes. I don't suppose you do — do you?"

"No more than you."

This was better. Another twist to the screw.

"I haven't seen anything down here to attract him."

"It doesn't bother me if there is."

"Doesn't it? Not with most people — but with Brock?"

She stopped and snatched her hand from his arm. It made him smile to see the anger surging through her tiny body. She's not red-haired for nothing, he thought; this is illuminating.

"What do you mean?" she asked deliberately.

"What I mean," he replied, "is that you're as hard as nails, Sophie, and you know generally just where you are, except with Brock. He's a match for you, and you know it. He's got you, Sophie, and my God, he can hold you."

"You mean ——"

“Just that. You’re as near to being in love with him as you’ve ever been with any one.”

The shaft flew true. Somehow she felt then as if that shrewd arrow of his mind had pierced deep into her heart, that if the shaft should ever be withdrawn, yet still would remain the barb, festering there, a never-to-be-forgotten pain. Love? A poor draggled thing, with tinsel wings crumpled, and a sneer behind its sentimental grimacing mask; a grotesque drab figure, lewd in its assumed finery, a treacherous, beckoning, empty thing, that mocked you. Love? Yes, something that happened to you, that led you down a rosy path that ended — where? She knew well. Respectability! Wives! Poor futile creatures who tried to keep up a great appearance of satisfaction, while all the time, down the melancholy dowdy years, their hearts ached for the love that had cheated them. Husbands! hot with passion for — three years! and then — oh, don’t tell *me!* She’d seen them, known them, even helped them! Well, it wasn’t the wives’ fault. How could they help it? Men wanted children, inflicted them on the bodies they owned, and then grew tired of the patient limbs and widening hips, the aging flesh, broken with the rotten pain of that giving. Men! they’d rob you if they could, steal and cheat and desert. They deserved what they got. You’d got to be hard. And Carlo now said she loved Brockenholt, who was worse than most of them, who knew which side of a bargain was the best for him. Had Jimmy tricked her too, outwitted her? Telling her how sensible she was all these years, that they knew what was what, yet knowing all the time that he’d made her love him?

So, standing there, under the moon, she clenched her little fists and with the angry tears burning her eyes:

“Damn you, Carlo,” she said. “Damn you! I hate you!”

And Carlo Maude, too clever to touch her then, his first objective gained, replied:

“Sophie, my dear, I’m sorry. I was only pulling your leg. Of course you’re fond of Brock, like we all are. But it’s nothing more, I know that. We’ll stroll back, eh?”

But the barb was fixed. Already she could feel, as it were, the poison of it in her blood. So Carlo thought she was in love with James Brockenholt, did he? Well, she wasn’t. She wasn’t. Nothing like it. Only if Jimmy went and didn’t come back, what then? What would happen, really happen? What sort of a loss would it be? Things would be queer without Jimmy somewhere in the background. But something had happened to him and it affected her. Well, if it did, she could cut the bonds that held them and begin again — elsewhere. One could always begin again, nearly always. Perhaps Carlo would be worth while consideration: he was kind — in a way; he was fond of her — in a way; he’d waited. Maybe a change would do her good. But it was tiresome. Jimmy was haven of a sort, and riding the storm alone, outside the bar, was a poor game. She’d had enough of that in her time. Nevertheless, when she’d broken with Jimmy . . . when she’d broken. . . . It was better to face things squarely: would a breaking be very hard? Lord, no — only tiresome! Only ——

Carlo was talking.

“ . . . They're generally glad enough to part when you show 'em the money. A lot of these old fools don't know the value of the stuff they've got.”

“ Yes,” she said, realizing dimly that Carlo was talking of a refectory table, newly purchased; but in her mind: this blessed life's just tramping miles and miles; as soon as you've found a seat somebody comes up and pushes you off. I'll have it out with Jimmy when we get back.

“ . . . In exactly the same way I picked up those Delft plaques. The ones with the girl's face and blue thing on her head, which you called a bathing cap. They're good, those are. It's a gift, of course, spotting stuff. You can't acquire it, though you can learn the devil of a lot through listening to experienced men. Nobody ever taught me, though.” Why didn't Carlo keep quiet for ten minutes; she wanted to think. The road was horribly gritty, too: bits of stone kept sneaking down between your foot and shoe. Yes, she'd have it out with Jimmy. Likely enough, there wasn't anything wrong at all, at least not much. Still, a good brisk row sharpened things up a bit.

“ Hallo,” exclaimed Carlo. There was a ring of surprise in his voice: his fingers gripped her arm just above the elbow. Ahead the road stretched white beneath the moonlight; shadows of trees cut it here and there, making bridges of shadows that crossed its course. A window, brightly lit, in the side of a small cottage obscure amidst the trees surrounding it, seemed suspended in the air. Against that yellow flag in the night, stood a girl, her head and shoulders clearly visible, leaning across the sill, the night wind plucking at the wilful

wisps of hair across her cheeks. Beneath, just off the road, the tall thick density of a man's shadow was visible. The window fell back suddenly into its surrounding darkness. As the man moved away they heard him singing softly, huskily, almost to himself,

*“ Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming,
Stars a-dreaming,
Oh, I want cher, Yes! I want cher!”*

They waited till he'd swung out of sight, watching him walking rapidly back to the town. Neither of them said a word. There seemed nothing to say. But Carlo Maude stuck his tongue in that side of his cheek, the farthest side, this time, from Miss Wontner. His eyes upraised, he and the moon seemed to enjoy a confidential and wholly delightful joke.

CHAPTER VII

WHEN they returned to the Marlton Arms they found Brockenholt sitting in the porch. He took the cigar from his lips as they approached and stood up.

“Been for a stroll?”

Maude, the curve of a smile tilting the corners of his mouth, replied:

“Yes. ‘On such a night as this . . .’ Brock. Sophie and I have been wandering beneath the moon. The ardent lover under such circumstances suits me admirably. You should try it yourself.”

Brockenholt, with a wicked grin, examined the end of his cigar, and then, raising his right eyebrow, regarded the other with open insolence.

“I see. Been making hay while the moon shines, eh, Carlo? You always were fond of other people’s — cattle!”

It was Sophie who stepped in between them, her face very white, one slender arm thrust across Maude’s waistcoat, an inadequate barrier to avert collision. It was typical of Brockenholt to defend himself by attacking, to cut the ground from under their feet. Even at that moment she couldn’t help admiring him. He’d got the nerve for anything. She pushed Carlo towards the door. He resisted, taking her wrists in his two hands and almost lifting her aside. His florid, handsome face was dark with anger; on his cheekbones two sullen

crimson patches bespoke the passion that choked him too completely for its utterance.

"Go in, Carlo," she whispered. "Go in, for God's sake. Leave this to me."

He dropped her wrists, hesitated, and then nodded. The sound of Brockenholt's chuckle reached him in the hall. He stopped and faced about, took a step towards the door and then turned again and ran upstairs. His hand trembled as he lit the gas in his room. He stood for some time looking at his reflection in the glass and then he smiled and prepared to go to bed.

In the porch Brockenholt was sitting down, puffing calmly at his cigar. Standing by the lintel Sophie could see at the glow of each puff the golden mask of his face, his eyes deep, narrowed, mocking up at her.

"That was unspeakable," she said at last, her voice very steady.

The cigar glowed, grew dead, glowed. His face appeared in sudden flashes out of the darkness, yet all the time she knew those bitter eyes of his were turned towards her. She could hear his breath, soft and regular, out of the blackness around him.

"Why did you do that, Jimmy?"

The cigar end described a circle. He was, she knew, making a gesture of query.

"Because," she heard him say, "because I resent any one attempting to spy upon me."

She started. So he'd seen them, had thought they'd followed him. But even so, why didn't he laugh the affair away? Things like this had happened before. It had never made any difference — then.

"We didn't follow you," she replied, "we just came upon you."

"Ah!"

"You must believe me, Jimmy. It was as great a surprise to us, certainly to me, as — it must have been to you!" She couldn't stop herself stabbing once at the imperturbable insolent shadow before her.

"Really?"

She must take him in hand, at once. This mood of his was dangerous. She approached the cigar end and reaching out with a hand found his knee and knelt beside him. He made no movement.

"Jimmy," she said. "Oh, Jimmy, don't be idiotic. You know I'm not a liar. We didn't follow you; we didn't want to see you. It just happened. That is all."

There was no answer. She took hold of the lapels of his coat and shook him gently.

"Answer me, Jimmy."

She could feel his breath upon her hair. She moved nearer to him. He'd always liked her hair, the subtle scent of it: once he'd told her it intoxicated him. She could feel the warmth of his great body.

"Answer me, Jimmy."

He stirred, and the cigar swung over her head. He drew deeply at it.

"I accept your statement."

"Then it's all right, Jimmy?"

He patted her gently on the shoulder and she crept still closer to him and slipped an arm around his neck, pulling gently, her face turned up to his. His lips brushed her forehead.

"Let's go back, Jimmy dear. I'm tired of this place. It's terribly dull. I — I don't like it."

He was looking down at her and to her surprise she saw his lips twitching and his forehead twisted in wrinkles of anxiety.

As he spoke her whole body stiffened. She felt suddenly cold, frozen on the moment, fear throbbing in her pulses.

"I don't think I can, Sophie," he was saying; "I don't think I can."

His hand was still patting her shoulder. It was as if he was trying to comfort her, to comfort himself. The town was very quiet, sleeping. Even the sounds of the house above them were gone. Window by window the lights had disappeared. She shivered slightly and clung to his coat. In her extremity the holding of him thus was some small comfort, as if by gripping the cloth tightly she could hold him, keep him there, always. The cigar was out, tossed upon the ground. He'd smoked it and thrown it away. There remained ashes; and in time they too would be scattered, lost. It had been a costly cigar. Now, it was finished with. Something dreadful was happening: something she'd always known must happen sooner or later; something she'd prided herself that she'd be ready to face, to conquer like the other things she'd conquered. You'd got to be hard. Or was she just imagining all this? Was it this grim country, so desolate, so empty that had frightened her? She must ask of him, of course, what was troubling him. Only — perhaps, it wouldn't matter asking him just now, this moment. She'd wait a little. He was here now, patting her shoulder, his breath upon her hair.

Perhaps something would fix them here for always, so she could be safe with his arm across her shoulders. She didn't want to begin again. It would be cold outside and lonely. And yet ——

“What is it, Jimmy?”

He raised himself in the chair and pulled her round before him, his hands on her shoulders, his eyes fixed on hers. She bit her lip and smiled gallantly back at him.

“Old sinner,” she said. “What is it?”

He looked down at her for a long time before he answered. It seemed he was trying to discover in that small white face before him an answer to some question that was hurting him.

“Just that,” he said quietly. “I don't think I can.”

Somehow she couldn't say anything, couldn't take her eyes from his. There was a fascination that held them both in the horror of the situation. They watched each other, gripped by a mutual anguish that kept them there, so still, so paralysed by this thing that had happened. She'd prepared against this day. She'd been so sure she was ready for it. But she'd not expected it to be like this. It was so long drawn out. It would, she knew, be much better to snap this tension quickly, to get it over. Yet something so disastrous had come about that she was lost. She struggled to regain control and then she scrambled to her feet, the movement bringing her back to things to be faced.

“But, Jimmy, why not?”

“I wish I knew,” he said. “If I knew I could tell you.”

“But you must tell me.” He must, he must.

She didn't understand him like this. How could she combat a point unknown to either of them. Somehow he seemed remote, beyond her comprehension of him.

"I tell you I don't know myself. I tried to explain the very first night we were down here. I knew you wouldn't understand. It's a curious feeling, Sophie. I want most desperately to be eighteen again. I can't put it better than that."

"And so ——" the uncertainty was intolerable.

"And so I can't take you back. I don't want to go back myself. I can't go back, till ——"

"Till ——?"

"Till I've found what's wrong with me."

"But you'd like *me* to go?"

He was silent for a minute, and then:

"Yes, Sophie, I want you to go ——"

"Jimmy, Jimmy dear, tell me, are you smitten elsewhere? We always agreed to be honest."

"I can't tell you, Sophie. Truthfully I don't really know. It's all beyond me."

So that was it. He too was out of his depth, floundering in unfathomable waters of his emotions. What should she do? If it was that girl in the window it would be all right. She must keep her head. She held him still. She held the beast in him. For the moment that ravenous creature of his individuality was in abeyance, but the time could again come when its hunger must be appeased. Only with its death would she lose her hold of him. And she was sure it would never die. Things would all come right. Eventually, if she kept her head now, he would come back to her. But somehow that

didn't make the present hurt any the less. It seemed a poor comfort.

"You needn't worry," she heard herself saying; "it's all right, Jim. You mustn't let it worry you. It's all right."

But he wasn't making it any too easy. She turned her back on him. From behind her she could hear him talking rapidly, the words tumbling out.

"I'm sorry, Sophie. My God, you don't know how sorry I am. It's not like me to apologise, my dear, but tonight I'm not like me. That's the trouble. I'm not like me any more. It's no good explaining, because, Lord knows if there's anything to explain. We've always known, Sophie, haven't we?" Oh yes, they'd always known. "We've had some good times: at Capri; and that six weeks on our own in Dieppe: we've had our money's worth." Yes, that was it. They'd had their money's worth. Only did you pay in silver coins or in some other way? What was it you paid with *really*? "We've lived a lot; we've had a lot." Of course they had. What was the use of going through all this? "We'll neither of us forget, my dear. Every moment's been worth while, hasn't it? I'll do anything I can, of course, and you've only got to ask."

"Oh, stop it, Jim," she said, "stop it, you fool."

He rose to his feet.

"It may not be permanent. I can't tell. But now — I'm sorry, Sophie."

"Of course you're sorry. So am I. But it seems to me that this easy dismissal is a little premature."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply, my dear Jim, that I can raise Cain in this place if I want to."

He came and stood beside her, his shoulder nearly level with her head.

"You'd not do that, Sophie," he replied. "I know you'd not do that."

"I don't see why not." But she knew he spoke the truth; that Carlo had spoken the truth: she was getting "soft"; but she must go; she couldn't bear this any longer: perhaps it would be all right in time. She wasn't going to mention the girl in the window. That would be cheap. She'd not admit possible defeat, a rival.

"One day," he said, "you'll find happiness, my dear."

She stamped her foot.

"For God's sake, Jim, keep away from that sort of talk. It's too damn funny for words. We understand one another, my dear boy, and that's all there is to be said."

He held out his hand.

"Thank you, Sophie. Thank you."

She shook the hand with mock solemnity.

"And now I'm off to bed; I'm tired."

It was difficult to find the matches in the hall. One's hands involuntarily seemed searching for something else — the lapels of a coat? No, matches! matches. God, but it was too damn funny for words. It made you choke. Jim apologising. But eventually it would all come right. He'd come back. But now — God, how it made you laugh, almost till you cried. Perhaps that's why her cheeks were wet. Crying with laughter . . . crying . . . with . . . laughter.

And early next morning Miss Wontner and Mr. Carlo Maude, in the latter's yellow and tremendous car, left before James Brockenholt was up. Carlo, behind the wheel, his check cap at a rakish angle, was still smiling.

CHAPTER VIII

So James Brockenholt was left alone, and with Sophie's departure Black Brockenholt came into his own. He spent the next week exploring old haunts, now wantonly and deliberately raising the ghosts. He tramped from Barbary to Martinsell, his car unused, his limbs regaining something of their elasticity and strength. He marvelled at himself, finding almost at every hour something surprisingly good to know. There seemed to be innumerable things of life which he had overlooked and was now discovering for the first time. Once, going down the Wooton Bassington Road, he stopped and talked to a road-mender, a brown old giant plying his hammer on his heap of flints. He'd seen the man twice before, when he'd passed him by, but this time he stopped at his "Mornin', sir."

"Good morning," said Brockenholt. "It's a beautiful day."

The road-mender spat upon his hands, the handle of his hammer resting against his leg. He grinned cheerfully.

"It is indeed," he said. "'Tis beautiful weather."

He rubbed his hands together. His face was brown and seamed with scores of little wrinkles, and the sides of his neck were criss-crossed with innumerable shallow creases. His battered bowler hat was green; the shoulders of his waistcoat were green. He seemed like some natural creature of

the downs, half-tree, half-man. As Brockenholt watched, the man seized the nut-brown sweat-polished handle, and swung the hammer over his head. The thick muscles knotted and relaxed in his hairy forearms. The skin of the biceps, just visible below the roll of his shirt sleeve, was hairless and white and smooth: across the ivory ball of muscle wriggled a swelling vein. The hammer fell, clean and true, on to the centre of a flint: five cracks spread across it. A tap, and the five pieces fell apart; a sweeping kick with a large boot, and they found their place in the heap by the ditch. The movement had the precision of an athlete's action with bat or club. So, thought Brockenholt, this man's work is an art.

"You do this every day?"

"Pretty near, sir. For twenty-fi' years, sir."

"And you don't get tired of it, eh?"

The road-mender lifted his head and looked out over the hills.

"It bean't no good to get tired, sir — the likes of me. I gets a touch of the sciatica sometimes, but it don't make much odds, sir. It don't make much odds. It's nice to see a road well-kep', sir."

Yes, it was nice to see a road well kept. You saw the results of your labour. There was a pride therein.

"You're staying hereabouts, sir?"

"For a bit, yes."

"'Tis a pretty enough place," said the road-mender and spat dark juice. There was a strange tranquillity about this man. Day by day Brockenholt supposed he walked along this strip of road, swinging his hammer, the flints chipping and split-

ting, his eyes, when he rested from the task, fixed on the blue and distant line of the horizon. There was some quality of eternity in that vacant kindly regard, some quality of timeless content, of — youth? Always youth: down here, amidst the old hills, even the aged seemed young. He questioned the man:

“ You live near here?”

“ Aye, sir. Behind ’ood. You can see th’ smoke. My missus ——”

“ You’re a married man?”

“ Aye, sir. And glad I am to be.”

Brockenholt laughed.

“ And a large family, eh?”

The road-mender rubbed his forehead with the back of a rough hand.

“ They were three, sir. They’m passed away now.”

“ I’m sorry.”

“ ’Tis nothing, sir. Two datters and a son. Em’ly died o’ the teething, and Maude took a cancer. They killed George in France. ’Twas no concern o’ mine they took ’im, but ’twere better he were biding near sheep hereabouts, than lie dead out there. Maybe ’tis right. The Lord giveth and ’E taketh away, they ses, sir. Missus took it hardly though, but she ses that’s’ right. She’m an old woman now. ’Twere harder for missus than for me, sir. She bore ’im and he was a fine lad, sir.”

So that was all, thought Brockenholt. That was the sum total of one man’s existence: to be born and to work; to take a wife and beget children; to see two die and, more bitter, never to see the other in death! What a life! And yet on the decline,

the days flying faster as the eye failed and the arm lost strength, the old couple could say, "The Lord giveth and He taketh away."

Often before dining at the Marlton Arms he would stand an hour in the bar listening to the conversation of the habitués. Miss Serjeant from Swindon had by now made up her mind that he was the one man who could make life an everlasting song for her. Hadn't he on his own accord said that he'd once loved a girl like her? Therefore she preened herself on sound of his footsteps, and gave more than full measure to his drinks. Frequently he chatted to her, while she warmed herself, as it were, under the mocking fire of his glances. But *her* pulses not alone quickened at his presence. For at night, when the moon was up, when the downs lay dusky silent and the sheep-bells hung songless from the sleeping rams, Isabel Luke, in her room that overlooked the Wooton Bassington Road, in the little house at the corner of the Common, waited for the crunch of Brockenholt's footsteps and the husky low tones of his voice quietly singing that very popular tune:

"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming . . ."

For each night he came and sang beneath her window, being romantic in this clumsy fashion, because he'd never experimented with romance before, because his usual methods of love-making were brusque and in a sense conventionally very much to the point. Singing beneath her window to this creature of youth whom he coveted; tasting once more the flavour of young wine, sharp and strong and heady; wanting her rather desperately, for

with her, her youth sewn close to him, no scissors of time could cut them apart. Her youth would be his. She was upon the threshold and the bud, beneath his knowledgeable hands, should grow into a lovely flower to deck his life. There would be no loneliness with her blooming in the chambers of his mind. With her kept and tended there, would be sanctuary; some place to creep to where nobody else could come and only he could smell the petals of her young eternal beauty, only he could touch that delicate plant.

Amid this glamour James Brockenholt was departed and Black Brockenholt was in command, a wilful flame of a man who, seeking, desired; who, desiring, would take.

And at the end of a week he received Mrs. Luke's invitation to tea — "If you are not too busy. We should be so very pleased to see you. You have not met my daughter, I believe. . . ."

No, he'd not "met" her daughter in that sense of the word, but in another.

*"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming,
Stars a-dreaming,
Oh, I want cher! Yes, I want cher!"*

CHAPTER IX

“OF course,” said Mrs. Brayham; “if that’s true it makes a great deal of difference. It shows a nice spirit notwithstanding.”

“Precisely,” agreed Mrs. Luke, in a tone conveying “I told you so.” “One can never judge by appearances, can one?”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” said Mrs. Brayham. “When he arrived it was necessary to — er — take a stand. Now that that creature has left — he sent her about her business, I hope — we can welcome him, with reservations of course, in a way worthy of his generosity.”

“So she *has* gone?” murmured Mrs. Luke, burning inwardly. One had heard as much, of course, but when one oneself didn’t question one’s servants or gossip with the shop people, one couldn’t know for certain, could one?

“Isabel, dear, the cake-stand,” and Isabel left the sitting room to search the pantry for the bamboo-stand that should proudly bear the plain madeira, the seed, and the half-dozen fancy cakes in honour of Mr. James Brockenholt’s appetite for tea. She was glad to find the bamboo-stand had worked one support free from one of its legs. The strut, splintered by frequent application of the family hammer and tin-tack box, was hanging limply. This would occasion half an hour spent in repairing it. It was just as well, she thought. A week had passed since that night when she played Romans. She’d never

dare to play them again, now. Down that white road of dreams somebody had come. The imaginary footsteps of her fantasy had given way to the crunching of those other concrete footsteps, that had stopped beneath her window. In the moonlight, how enormous he'd looked, standing down below, his shadow carving almost a deep ragged trench across the grass. At first he'd startled her, swinging so abruptly into her dreams. And then, when she'd jumped back from the window and blown the light out frantically, how penetrating had been that husky voice of his, singing:

*"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming,
Stars a-dreaming,
Oh, I want cher! Yes, I want cher!"*

Of course he was just passing, and because she'd been standing at her window, the light full on, it had made him look up. As for the song — well, every one was singing it! But it had been rather wonderful and that was a week ago. And every evening since she'd heard the crunch, crunch, crunch, of his footsteps passing by, and every evening that deep low voice had sounded from outside. Now, she knew it was meant for her! *For her!* She'd peeped through the curtains once and seen him looking up, his face bright in the moonlight. It was lovely fun, but she oughtn't to think about it. Mum had said he was a wicked man and that was sweeping condemnation. On the other hand, Mum seemed awfully pleased he was coming to tea this afternoon, so perhaps after all he couldn't be so very wicked. Perhaps he'd reformed. Anyway, she was jolly glad the bamboo-stand was broken.

She wouldn't have to wait in the sitting room and get horribly hot and uncomfortable with the suspense. When he came, it would all be a secret which she wouldn't let him know that she knew. It would be very strange to see what he looked like in daylight. She'd just pretend that she'd never seen him before. But then, she ought to be sensible, and just not think about it. Anybody with as much power and money and reputation as he wouldn't fall — fall in love with — her! Then, why did he come every night and send funny little shivers up her spine with his crunching footsteps? Perhaps it was just wickedness. What did that matter, though? Anybody who looked like he did, who came suddenly down her road, couldn't be judged by the ordinary rules of conduct. It was all muddy: sometimes she thought she'd imagined the whole affair. She was frightened to go down the town in case she should see him. It would be very awkward to be taken unawares like that, running into him unprepared. But now, he was coming this afternoon, to the house. Of course it hadn't happened at all really; she was making it up, building stories — the jangling of the front door bell made her jump. Yes, it was his voice. She edged farther into the pantry. His footsteps passing, now: the sitting room door opening, and Mum's voice, "How do you do." Daddy shuffling along the passage. The door opening and closing again. Another tack — there! She ought to go in, now — was that firm enough? — now, go in — a little more hammering, just there. After all, it would have been better to stay inside the room. Would it be best to take the stand in loaded with cakes, or to fetch them

afterwards? If you had the stand in one hand and had to balance it, how difficult it would be to shake hands. Or didn't you shake hands? Just bow? But you couldn't bow over the cakes, you'd probably upset them. Well, leave the cakes outside and pretend you'd forgotten them. Then Mum might be annoyed thinking you silly to let things like that slip your memory, or old Mrs. Brayham would smile her sickly smile that tried to tell you she understood how embarrassing it was, when she didn't understand a bit. No, of course — tell Elizabeth to bring the cakes in.

She ran into the kitchen.

"I've mended the cake-stand, Elizabeth," she said breathlessly. "Will you bring them — it — in, please?"

Elizabeth, who cooked, waited, washed-up, cleaned, scrubbed for the Lukes, but above everything else loved Isabel, allowed her fat oval face to relapse into a grin, with:

"All right, Miss Isabel, you run in then."

Thereupon Isabel ran in: it seemed best to get it over quickly and that was why Brockenholt's sophisticated heart gave a thump when she stood in the doorway, a flower to decorate that appalling sitting room, her cheeks faintly flushed, and her eyes very bright indeed.

He rose and shook hands with her.

"My daughter Isabel, Mr. Brockenholt."

How quickly she took her fingers from his, how he wanted to tell her there wasn't any need to be really so scared, that he too was a little bit scared at this thing that now seemed certain to overwhelm them. How strong that thing was. Even that old

cow of a mother couldn't break the spell, nor her blatant schemings, nor her futile silly mind and her ugly ill-chosen sitting room, with the bric-à-brac, the lithographs, the bookcase with its leather fringes along the shelves; her obvious invitation to tea; the innuendoes of that absurd Brayham woman with her beady eyes and hooky nose; old Luke's frequent catarrhal sniffs and Isabel's cotton frock — none of these could destroy the illusion. Didn't that show how strong it was, that he could suffer these fools gladly and let them lavish fat phrases on him with their flat idiotic voices? What would they say when they knew? They'd be fulsome and disgusting but that wouldn't matter. He and this lovely girl would shake the Marlton dust from their feet and together take the world by storm. He would teach her to dress, to play her pretty tricks in silk instead of cotton. "Jimmy Brockenholt, of Lingfields, and his lovely young wife." Wouldn't they devour the *Tatler* and the *Sketch* down here? How that old pink elephant with her weak heart and mauve face would wheeze, "My dear, see this," and then pages of photos: "Mrs. James Brockenholt, the beautiful young wife of the well-known director of Lingfields." "Isabel Brockenholt (and friend), at Ascot." He chuckled to himself.

And all the time the unsuspecting Isabel, sitting beside her father, thought: "He *is* good looking! He *is* wonderful! I do love him, don't I?"

"Your friends have left, Mr. Brockenholt?" asked Mrs. Brayham, disregarding the indignant glare of Mrs. Luke's eyes.

"They went a week ago," said Brockenholt, putting his teacup down with a rattle on the pseudo-

mahogany occasional table placed at his side. "They only came down just — to see the place."

"Another cup, Mr. Brockenholt? Yes ——"

"I thought she was *so* charming," continued Mrs. Brayham.

"I used to," replied Brockenholt.

"Of *course*," agreed Mrs. Brayham sympathetically. "And when do you go back?"

"When I get what I want."

"How interesting."

"Isabel," rasped Mrs. Luke, "Isabel, Mr. Brockenholt's cup. No, no, sit down please, Mr. Brockenholt, Isabel can manage nicely. You do take sugar, don't you? During the war one grew so accustomed to give up little trifles like that, that one has to ask nowadays, I find. We all gave up sugar," she added triumphantly. She sighed. "It was the least we could do. Archie, bring your chair closer, you're dropping jam."

"I haven't got a knife," said Mr. Luke. "I never seem to have a knife."

"Isabel, a knife, dear. No, child; the other cupboard. We were very short of rations down here. I always feel we, at least, did our bit, to help the brave boys out at the front. It was very trying. They organized Zeppelin drills up at the College; the very sound of the whistles made me feel shaky. My heart, you know? Yes, very trying, but then, one cannot have everything, can one?"

"My husband was in the Local Volunteers," said Mrs. Brayham, spitefully.

"I tried three times," growled old Luke, "but they wouldn't have me. Catarrh, you know. Colds in winter, hay-fever in summer."

"That'll do, Archie. We have a new gramophone, Mr. Brockenholt; perhaps you would care to hear it. Isabel, the records, dear. My husband is so musical. I too dote on music. It's in our family: my father once sang before the Queen. Westminster Choir, you know. Oh, very talented."

But it was Brockenholt who helped Isabel find the records. Her hand was shaking as she handed them out to him.

"What would you like?" she asked. "These are opera, and there's some popular things down at the bottom."

How sweet those lips of hers were and her eyes, cloudy beneath the delicate fringe of their lashes.

"Here's 'Il Trovatore,'" she said. "'Selections from Faust.' Then songs — 'Two Eyes of Grey,' 'The Indian Love Lyrics,' 'O Star of Eve,' 'Good-bye' —"

"Slop!" said Brockenholt under his breath, then chuckled as she grimaced at him.

"Sh! Mum chose them. Daddy always goes out to his study when we put the gramophone on. Do be quick!"

"Where's the popular stuff, as you call it?" He took a record out of her hand. "That'll do."

"Have you found one?" asked Mrs. Luke.

"Yes," said Brockenholt and wound the gramophone handle savagely; "we'll have this."

Luke stirred uneasily in his chair.

"If you don't mind, my dear —"

"Really, Archie."

"My husband calls gramophones abominations," twittered Mrs. Brayham; "but then of course he isn't musical."

With a sliding groan the gramophone spun into the opening bars, plucked up courage, and droned out:

"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming . . ."

There was no chance for Brockenholt to watch Isabel: she was busy kneeling before the cupboard, apparently extremely busy searching for further records.

"Charming, of course," said Mrs. Brayham, when the last high note had relapsed into the scratching of the needle. "Charming. One knows it so well."

But when she had left Mrs. Luke suggested:

"Isabel, I'm sure Mr. Brockenholt would like to see the garden."

Mr. Brockenholt was quite sure he'd be delighted to see the garden.

"One's garden is such a delight, Mr. Brockenholt. Unfortunately nowadays I cannot attend personally to it. My heart will not permit such exertion. We expect a fine crop of apples this year. Last year there was trouble with blight. So disappointing. We almost lived on apples alone during the war. I do feel the lack of nourishment was a direct cause of my getting so run down. But there you are . . ." Her voice followed them out into the garden. "You can go to your study, Archie, if you wish . . . and send Elizabeth in . . . how that woman talks . . . very distinguished, Archie, don't you think . . . yes, go along now, right away . . . I can't help it if you have lost your pen, Archie . . . one would have thought . . ."

Tall as he was, Isabel reached his shoulder. Her fair soft hair seemed to capture and intertwine

amongst its loose coils something of the late sun's deep gold. Her arms were bare almost from the shoulder and it made him smile to think that the middle finger and thumb of one of his hands could easily encircle her elbow. She pointed out the apple trees, the strawberry beds, the runner-beans, the inverted flower-pots placed by Luke over reluctant plants of the obscure vegetable species; she talked quickly and excitedly. She's embarrassed, he thought; she doesn't want me to talk, because she doesn't know what I'm going to say next. In fact, she's frightened of giving herself away. Altogether she's frightened.

"This is the potting shed. Daddy used it for carpentry sometimes, but ——"

"Miss Luke?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you think there's another subject much more interesting than, say, cauliflowers?"

"Is there?" Little minx, for all her barrier of virginity, there was a touch of spirit that promised well.

"Most certainly, yes. You, for instance!"

She glanced at him sharply.

"Oh, I'm not very interesting." There was no self-consciousness in the remark.

"Well, I am."

She laughed at that, frankly.

"You're very conceited."

"Not really. But tell me, how very bad do you think I am, from what you've heard."

She became confused and caught her lower lip with two white teeth.

"I don't know!" she answered honestly.

He smiled down at her. There were so many things he could say, appropriate things which one could always say. But it was a new and rather thrilling experience for him to find himself at a loss for words. One must be so very careful not to frighten her. What was it that was so elusive about her? Perhaps it was her honesty, her entire lack of knowledge of the rules of the game. Well, wasn't that what he desired in her above everything else? Innocency and youth? Wasn't it through her that he should share some part of these two things? He'd never have to worry again about the marching years, with this fountain of younger life to draw from. He was young now himself, standing with her at the bottom of the garden, looking down at Isabel amongst the flowers. If she was frightened, it was because she was ignorant of what might happen next — lack of experience. In that case, only honesty could combat honesty. Besides, he wanted to be honest.

"I'm not so terribly bad," he said, "when you know what badness really is. I'm only rather hungry."

She didn't answer. Instinct told her what might lie beyond the door on whose threshold she stood; instinct warned her, but instinct urged her to cross the step. If he was going to make love to her it would be very wonderful. But she wasn't sure she wanted that — now. If you voyaged into this strange land, what happened to you? You'd got to know so much — like Miss Wontner, maybe — and she was so ignorant, nobody ever told you, and she might get lost. But that polished manner and worldly-wise look of his wasn't on his face now.

He seemed very serious, so tall above her, and curiously enough, rather embarrassed. She'd like to run away from him very quickly and at once. Yet she wanted to stay and listen. When some ordinary person tried to be silly, you just shut them up, because it spoilt things, but this big man you couldn't shut up. But then again, it would be mere vanity to think he liked you very much. Perhaps he'd done all this before and it was the proper way to amuse yourself under such circumstances. But suppose he did . . . Oh, suppose he only did! He was troubled, though. She could see that, and when he smiled at her it wasn't that smile he gave Mum or Mrs. Brayham, it was a sort of especial smile, a little bit wistful, and his eyes were kind in a sort of way.

"I shall be down here for some little time," he was saying; "if you'd like to, I'll take you for a run in the car some time. We'll ask your mother."

She nodded.

"It would be lovely."

They walked back towards the house. At the door he stopped.

"You'll be quite safe," he said; and then: "Do I sing well?"

CHAPTER X

THERE is a wood perched on the summit of Martinsell, that high hill. The fir-trees are planted very close together, slender and tall, the moss deep about their roots, the lips of the upper branches pale-green against the sky. It is a desolate and lovely place poised between earth and heaven. On a certain evening, some ten days after Mrs. Luke's tea-party, when the sun touched the dark trunks with flame, Isabel stood leaning against the gate leading into the wood, while Brockenholt lay full length on the grass beside her feet. And while she rested her elbows on the gate, peering into the gold-green depths of the wood, she felt suddenly the grasp of a hand upon her instep, and that deep voice saying from behind her:

“Isabel! Oh, Isabel . . .”

There was no mistaking that impassioned pronunciation of her name. There was no chance of retreat now. As before in the garden, a quick throb of fear snatched at her breath, but now, rushing after it, drowning it, some terrible all-conquering emotion seized her, till she felt herself trembling all over. Then before she was aware of movement she was facing about, his arms around her knees, and his dark glowing face upturned to hers. Her hands were on his shoulders and all she could see in that tumultuous moment was his eyes burning beneath her, burning into her, setting her alight. Then she was held close to him, the scrubby material of his

tweed coat scratching at her hot cheek and his lips touching her hair and his voice whispering:

“My darling, I want you so awfully . . . Isabel . . . Isabel . . .”

She raised her bare arms till her fingers touched the bristly-cropped hair at the back of his neck. And then his lips were groping for hers, his arms crushing her; she was drowning in this deep sea of ecstasy, drowning with his mouth hard against hers, the grip of his fingers on her shoulders, exquisite pain. . . .

Then at length he spoke, his voice shaky, hardly audible above the hammering of her heart and the violence of her breathing:

“You wanted us to be like this, didn’t you, Isabel? . . . you wanted this? . . . I love you so much . . .”

Wanted him like this? Dear heart, yes, a thousand times! Wanted him? This splendid traveller into her dreams, who’d sung beneath her window, stepping out of the night along her road, making her dreams come real, making reality more wonderful even than dreams!

“Tell me, Isabel.”

Was that smothered voice from the cover of his shoulder her own voice answering:

“Yes.”

It couldn’t be true. She was still standing by the gate imagining things; she’d wake up in a minute. But his voice was still sounding.

“Let’s be sensible, Isabel . . . let’s talk things over. . . .”

And while she nestled beside him in the crook of his arm, her face still hidden, he told her;

"We'll tell your mother tonight, won't we? There's no need to wait long, is there? We can get married down here if you like. And then, my darling, we'll take a long month abroad and go back to town."

His arm tightened about her as she trembled.

"You shall have all the world if you want it, Isabel. All the world. They shall see how beautiful you are, they shall see what a flower I have found. You'll find things a bit different from down here, but you'll like it, won't you?"

She nodded. How could she speak when such a miracle was taking place?

"We'll live in the cubby-hole I've got. It must do for the present. But it shall have everything in it you want. We'll show 'em, Isabel. You'll be happy with such a wicked person as me, won't you? You do want this? My life's been very different from yours. Not all good. There's a bit of the brute in me, Isabel, but you'll kill it." He didn't know then how long and bitter that death-struggle would be. "I've got to take you away. You'll be lovelier than them all." She didn't know to whom he referred. She was soon to know. "You're so sweet, Isabel, and fresh and lovely and innocent. Bless you, Isabel, bless you, I'll be so proud."

And then of her own accord she put up her hands and pulled his face down to hers.

Before she went to bed that night she stood for a long time before her window. A haze encircled the moon. Barbary was a purple denser darkness in the night. Summer scents and the sleeping sounds of the country side came to her. He passed by, calling up softly:

"Good night, little wife."

"Good night," she whispered back. "Good night, my darling Jim."

And then she told the purple wedge of Barbary:

"I will repay him. Oh, I will repay him. I'll slave and live and die for him! That *he* should choose *me*! His wife!"

"I love him dreadfully," she told the downs.

A month later she stood, Isabel Brockenholt now, by the rail of the ship that was taking them to Majorca for their honeymoon.

There was no end to these wonders, she thought: they crowded in bewildering rapidity. Even now she couldn't believe all those vivid pictures which flashed through her mind to be impressions of facts and not of fantasy. Each one seemed more amazing than the last. There never would be an end to them, there never would be an end to anything. How funny Jim had looked with the soap all white over his chin and cheeks, and how delicious the rasping sound of his razor. She could find something wonderful in that . . . Jim shaving! Nobody else could watch Jim, her Jim, dabbing the stubby brush in the soap, rubbing his face, sharpening his razor to scrape his skin all smooth and shiny and soft. It was one of the million little things she alone possessed about him. She must go through them all again to make it real, to pinch herself and make sure she wasn't dreaming. He'd come up soon from their cabin, and then she'd be so occupied discovering fresh marvels that she wouldn't have time to think over the old ones.

Wasn't the sea clean and bright, miles of it all

around them: no land in sight, till this afternoon, Jimmy had said. He'd be up soon, she must make haste.

Would ever that wood die away, the little fir-copse on Martinsell where Jimmy had told her? In her mind the wood ever would remain fixed eternally in that gentle sun of the evening, the trunk's long shadows falling across the dark green ground below, the wind rustling along the twigs, and from the outside of this dim green world of theirs, the sheep-bells tinkling over the downs. How thrilled every one had been! You'd never have thought Mum could have got so excited without her heart betraying her. And Elizabeth, when she heard, dropping the saucepan, clattering on the floor, and throwing her arms round her and saying, "Well, I never did. I never did." Just as if nobody had ever got engaged before. But that was right; nobody ever had to such a splendid person as Jim. Mrs. Brayham, all fluff and flurry, trying hard to keep cool and collected. "A most excellent match, my dear Isabel." And dear old Mrs. Lang-Davies, "I hope you'll be very happy, dear child. I shall tell my son, who's in town, to come and call on you when you get back. I hope life will be kind to you." Kind to you? What an absurd thing to say! Life and God and everybody was kind. Marvellously kind. Then Jim going about with her, smiling down at her, waiting on her. . . . Only one thing had been horrid: the afternoon Mum had called her into the sitting room, a week before the marriage, and — told her things! What did Mum want to go and do that for? It wasn't necessary. She'd always do

what Jim wanted her to do: her only aim was to make Jim as happy as he'd made her. Jim could have told her wisely and carefully and tenderly. She'd looked forward to Jim telling her in his quiet gentle way. And Mum hadn't seen how it had hurt her, talking like that, about her and Jim. It had made her feel all sort of cold and frightened, and she'd had to go to Jim afterwards and ask him. That had made him angry, dark and stormy, not with her, but with Mum. She'd cried a little bit then, and Jim had held her close to him, where she felt safe and happy and awfully stupid when she felt better and wasn't crying any more. Yes, that had been horrid of Mum.

But now they were on their honeymoon. A whole long month to spend in Majorca. What a lot of money Jim had and how lovely it was to be so powerful as he was and make other people do just what you told them! All sorts of things came back to you, when you had the opportunity to indulge in them. The church and her dress! "Lilies for you," Jim had said. Lilies, white and fragrant and lovely. Her silver dress and the little sprigs of orange blossom, Jim beside her, so big and strong, "to have and to hold from this day forward." The friends around her, all happy because she was happy. "The bride's day," Jim had said.

"Dear God," she thought, "he's given me all this, all this. Help me to help him, to live up to what he wants me to be. Please, dear God, make me a success."

Now they were steaming out to Majorca: days beneath a new bluer sky; ahead the everlasting

glorious road to march, side by side; all good things to come. I don't deserve it all, she thought, I don't deserve it.

And then he was beside her, coming to fetch her for breakfast, his fingers touching her arm.

"Why the tears?"

"Oh, Jimmy darling, I'm so happy, I'm so terribly happy."

How silly to cry now, with the sea and Jim all around you! Crying for joy, crying . . . for . . . joy . . .

II

THE HOUSE IN FULHAM SQUARE

“I will make you brooches and toys for
your delight.”

CHAPTER I

BROCKENHOLT had owned the house for the past three years. Though living practically by himself, it had been, to his way of thinking, necessary to surround himself with a certain majesty. He had wired from Marlton, the day before his marriage, instructing Waller, that shrewd man of parts, his "man" formerly, now butler beneath the new *régime*, to arrange the house for the arrival of Mrs. James Brockenholt. Waller, wise in the ways of his master, prepared as always for any emergency engineered by the sudden whims that blew through those same corridors as unexpectedly as draughts, had merely nodded his head once or twice and confided to Mrs. Bortle, who cooked immaculately for a very high wage, that the master had "made his choice." Mrs. Bortle, who had been on the point of leaving for the last three years from a sense of what should be what and though it weren't no business of hers what other people did, yet some things weren't what she were accustomed to, in answer clasped her hands before her portly apron, and:

"Well, I 'opes it steadies him."

"That I can't say, not knowing," was Waller's further comment. "But" — ominously — "I has my instructions."

The chambermaid and the kitchen maid, as always marvellously intrigued by the omnipotence of the master of the house in Fulham Square, immediately ran through the acquaintances of that thunderous

gentleman, speculating on the identity of the bride.

"No one we knows," said Waller.

"If it was," remarked Mrs. Bortle, "if it was — I should leave."

"That doesn't signify, Mrs. Bortle, but I has my instructions."

Therefore the house was invaded by a small army of decorators, painters, plumbers, carpenters, and furnishing experts. Another sheaf of telegrams directed the occupation from Majorca. Waller assumed an air of added importance. Mrs. Bortle kept herself to herself; Kathie and Banks regaled the decorators, painters, plumbers and carpenters in a way that encouraged them to arrive early and leave late.

The house had always been beautiful. It faced the square with a certain stern solid satisfaction. Seven steps ran out to the portico, with its Doric columns. The front door was stained dark mahogany, and in its upper portion brass network guarded the dark green glass panels. The hall was lofty and at first narrow, suddenly opening into the main chamber, where the great staircase curved upwards to the first floor. Pale green were the walls of the hall and a line of nine sporting prints ran along the left side. On the right lay the dining room, panelled very faint blue, the chair seats covered with royal blue, glowering down from above the sideboard a massive, somewhat gloomy oil-painting of Tintagel. On the first floor the drawing room occupied the whole front of the house. Tall lean windows opened out on to an iron balcony overlooking the gardens in the square. A huge mirror of gilt wood and painted panels was over the mantelpiece. The room

was delicious in warm chintz and Rose du Barry; a very fine room, full, but not too full, of very fine things. Next door was Brockenholt's study with a red brick fireplace and red leather furniture; opposite was a small square room now half-prepared as a boudoir for the lady of the house. Above were six bedrooms and higher still, most private, and indeed most personal of all, the quarters put aside for Mrs. Bortle, Waller, and the maids.

The decorators, painters and experts had worked hard. The house was proud of itself. Its newly refreshed exterior stood out amongst its neighbours. Almost it seemed to have grown bigger, more important. The trees in the gardens rustled their way to autumn, wondering perhaps what new thing was quickening to give their old companion so grand a position amongst its fellows. The beech tree opposite had seen the house change hands many times; it had seen comings and goings down those seven white steps, the mahogany door opening and slamming to, change and change, life and death, passing up and down, interminably, continually. Now change again had come, whitening the house's face, washing its pillars, touching up its complexion. Who should know for what thing these things were done? For what thing's happiness, for what thing's pain? These last three years, the windows had blazed by night, cars had throbbed up to the portico, and in the still hours the air had been whipped with the laughing and cackling from the brilliant interior. But this last month the windows had been eyeless sockets by night and by day blind with curtains, only from inside had come the sound of hammers and pails and footsteps, a glimpse of the movement of white

aprons and pots of paints. The house was being prepared, being made worthy. The leaves of the trees as yet unfallen were becoming stained too, with their regal colour of annual sleep till the young year should stir sap again. The trees as well seemed ready to greet this new thing that had given the house new glory. The twigs nudged one another, the leaves winked, and below the rhododendron and laurel bushes patiently watched the mahogany front door.

To those seven steps then, beneath that noble portico with the Doric columns, came this afternoon, swinging round the corner of the square in the shining saloon Daimler, James Brockenholt and his wife, Isabel.

Had anybody ever had a home like this before?

"Oh, Jimmy," she said, as the chauffeur held open the door of the car, "Oh, Jimmy! You are a terrible story-teller. You said it was just a sort of cubby-hole!"

Brockenholt, helping her from her seat with an unnecessary but adoring arm, his smile more captivating and brilliant than it had ever been before, caught at her hand as she stepped past him.

"Well, this is only to start with, at any rate."

So she was amazed, was she, and bewildered? Well, that was as it should be! How beautiful she was in these new clothes of hers, how sweet a thing, how adorably — young! They'd passed through Paris on the way back, spending four days there, shopping. Moreover, they had found Lisette, the amazing, the choicest of ladies' maids, who now in trim but very chic black, covered with hat-boxes and exhilaration, jumped from the car.

A very good girl Lisette, he thought, with very good taste and very knowing ways, who'd help in her rôle to adorn this lovely flower of a wife. She'd a pretty leg too, had Lisette, he noticed, as she jumped from the car. So she was amazed, was she? This beautiful Isabel, so tall and fair in her new clothes. The pretty ways of her! It was like taking a kiddie into the Christmas bazaar at a big store and saying, "Take your choice. You can have everything." He was a new man already, even after one short month with her. What a wonder this Youth was, notwithstanding all the rubbish talked about it! It caught at your heart; it was a perpetual delight: it made you ashamed of your old cynicism and hollow pretences. And he owned her now, by right of God, by right of law, by right of himself.

Waller opened the mahogany door, his lean face very expressionless, his black coat fitting very well. Smart man, Waller, who did what he was told promptly and well, and, moreover, kept his thoughts to himself. Behind Waller, in the hall, Mrs. Bortle dignified in black, Banks and that slut Kathie. Why didn't Kathie put on black too, instead of that print thing?

"This," said Brockenholt, twinkling, "this, Waller, is your mistress!"

Waller bowed.

Isabel, looking back over her shoulder at her husband, smiled shyly and a soft warm flush tinged her cheeks. She held out her hand.

"How do you do — Waller?"

Waller without a tremor touched the gloved fingers with his own.

"Thank you, Madam."

"This is Mrs. Bortle, Isabel," Mrs. Bortle bobbed. "Banks and the — what is it, Waller?"

"The kitchen maid, sir."

"The kitchen maid, Isabel."

Funny child! shaking hands with them . . . just like her! Frank and careless and kind. Bless her! they'd all love her, nearly as much as he did. And the rest of 'em? Ah! the rest of 'em! They should see what James Brockenholt had found for wife. They'd sit up and take notice, when she'd grown accustomed to the harness and all its trappings.

"You saw everything was done as I ordered, Waller?"

"Yes, sir."

"You found no difficulty?"

"No, sir."

Boxes bumping on the seven steps, Lisette behind.

"Waller!"

"Yes, sir."

"This is Mrs. Brockenholt's maid. See everything is put in order for her."

"Yes, sir."

They sat in front of one of the drawing-room windows after dinner, with the room unlit, waiting for the moon to rise over the chimneys and trees opposite. Jim was beside her, their chairs drawn close together, his hand resting on her arm. She was tired with the journey and the excitement in home-coming. Jim must be tired too, lying back in his chair his legs in their black trousers reaching out in front, his feet crossed. He was indeed sunk in a drowsy sense of satisfaction. Now and again he glanced at the golden head just beyond his fingers and sighed. Her hands cupped her chin and

her shoulders were dusky white in the late twilight. It was a wonderful feeling this, to sit beside so lovely a creature which belonged to you. It gave him a greater sense of power and possession than anything else had ever done. No force of Heaven or earth could take this from him. This is completion, he thought, and let his eyes close sleepily. But Isabel, listening to the distant roar of traffic and watching the lights in the houses the far side of the square spring up and glimmer through the trees, tried hard to analyse the emotions that irritated her.

Perhaps this uneasiness at the back of her mind was due to the strangeness of the things that had come so suddenly upon her? Or was it the realization that there were facts to be faced now? Yes, that was it. The confused and miraculous dream was over. No longer could she leave everything to Jim, follow his instructions, let him lead her. This was home, her home, and she was to manage this great place for him and to act on her own in many ways. That meant responsibility. She didn't shirk the thought any more than the facts to come, but under the circumstances it made her a little worried. Things were so very different. There were so many little details to become acquainted with, small trivial things that might matter such a lot. This you must do for yourself, that must be done for you. Shopping at home had been a simple matter. Very often Mum had chosen your clothes and helped you buy the material. Then Elizabeth had cut out after you'd pinned the paper patterns. There was nothing very formal about that. But in Paris you'd been driven to some wonderful place

that really wasn't like a shop at all. You'd sat down with Jim and watched a parade of beautiful women in more beautiful dresses. When you got excited (you didn't like to point somehow) and whispered to Jim he just waved his stick like a magic wand and presto!—there were boxes and boxes back at the hotel: tryings-on, fat marcelled ladies plucking at you, turning you this way, twisting you that, dapper little men snatching great folds of priceless materials and holding them against you, seemingly a crowd of businesslike people who used you, though in a most courteous way, as a dummy. They'd talked all the time, pins all over them, working feverishly and apparently disconnectedly. "If Madam could turn this way — so. Madam can see the back in the mirror? Perhaps ——" And what had the mirror shown her in repeated marvels, those four days? Somebody tall and slender, with a rather scared white face and big eyes, a stranger sheathed in shimmering silver, in rose and gold, somebody neat and very, very — "chic" — that was smart of course, in a little coat and skirt of grey, with never a wrinkle about the shoulders or a pucker at the top of the sleeves, with a tiny round black hat, a red feather stuck through the brim; somebody else, heaps of somebodies in glorious dresses of subtle silks, with thrilling patterns of beads; morocain, crêpe de Chine, brocade, taffeta . . . turquoise, jade, white, rose, silver and gold. . . . Dresses cunningly made, indelibly signed, Reville, Lanvin, Callot, Patou, Martial et Armond! Names of the mighty! Names of women's gods! Names of awe! And all those somebodies laughing back at her from the high

clear mirrors were — herself! Oh, but it was different, it was miraculous, almost — terrifying!

Then Jimmy had found Lisette. How funny it was to have somebody to dress you, somebody who by right of hire and custom took it for granted that you couldn't do your own hair or dress yourself properly! And Lisette had liked her hair.

“Madam has such gorgeous hair.”

“Oh, Lisette, do you think so?”

“It is so soft, Madam, and so ve-ery beautifully golden,” and holding a handful over Isabel's head so she could see in the looking-glass.

“It is sunshine-hair, Madam. It has a light of its ve-ery own.”

She was glad Lisette liked her hair: was pleased to brush it, to twist the thick coils of it expertly, to rub her scalp. Somehow that gave you confidence in this stranger who intruded into your room. It was generous of Lisette and kind of her to praise a thing like that in somebody else.

“It is a pleasure to attend to Madam. She is so beautiful.” That made you feel wriggly and you rather wanted to kiss Lisette, which would be probably wrong in this new world, and you got a bit flustered and changed the subject. But somehow Lisette's praise was so impersonal, as if all her life she'd been accustomed to handling beautiful living things, as indeed she had, that you felt her criticism to be most valuable. Lisette knew by heart all the little things that worried you, but then you couldn't ask Lisette any more than you could ask Jimmy. It would seem so silly not to know, and they both thought you so wonderful that it would be showing them, perhaps cruelly, that after

all you were still puzzled and impossibly human.

Now this immense house was hers and she must take her place as director of household duties. Jim would want to give parties, and, he'd told her as much, show his friends what a wife he had found for himself. What was it Jim loved her for? It couldn't be only because she loved him so desperately that the very thought of it was almost pain. She wasn't so beautiful as all that, she wasn't clever like Jim, she wasn't worthy of all this splendour. And he was so kind with her, so tender; the way he laughed at her silly mistakes and stupid questions, it was as if he found some quality of happiness in that inexperience which she condemned in herself with such fervour. Dear Jim, she thought, it doesn't matter why you love me so long as you do. Even if you didn't I should still love you most terribly. Nothing will ever, ever stop me loving you. And if I have to learn things, dear Jim, I won't mind a bit, I'll learn hard and quickly so you'll be pleased with me, because there's nobody in the world like you and I'm so proud, so awfully proud you chose and want me. It's that that counts, Jim, not the dresses and the other lovely things, but just because you *want* me. I love you so.

That was why he found her suddenly kneeling before him, her head against his knees, her thin white arms reaching up to touch his face, so that he started, blinked the drowsiness out of his eyes, and smiled down at her.

"Hullo, what? Tired?"

"Yes, Jim — no. Oh, Jim, isn't this all too wonderful?"

He laughed.

“Bless your heart! Hop up, here’s somebody ——” Waller, two letters on a tray, was beside them.

“The evening post, sir.”

Brockenholt glanced down and then quickly lifted the envelopes from the salver, and,

“Thanks. One for you, Isabel.”

The other letter he thrust into the pocket of his dinner jacket, rose, yawned, crossed to the table with its glasses and decanters and helped himself to a drink.

“Oh, Jimmy, it’s from dear old Mrs. Lang-Davies.”

“Yes? Who’s she?”

“Why, she was at the wedding. The old thing with grey hair and the funny little wizened face. You called her ——”

“The chimpanzee! I remember. Well, what’s she got to say?”

“Leonard Lang-Davies, that’s the son, is up here. A journalist, I gather. She’s told him to come and call. He’s a dear, Jimmy. We knew each other as kids. You’ll like him awfully. Who’s yours from?”

“Shall I?” asked Brockenholt. “Mine’s nothing. We’ll toddle to bed, shall we? I’ll be up soon.”

And while Isabel mounted the stairs, he examined with obvious distaste Miss Wontner’s scrawling handwriting that sloped across the violet notepaper so eminently like herself:

“ . . . I really do think you might have told me, Jimmy! Where did you find her, and what’s she like? I shall come and see. I thought the

turtle-dove feathers had moulted off you years ago. I shall call. You won't believe me when I wish you luck, but I do wish it. I feel rather that I should wish *her* luck. Carlo feels hurt you didn't ask him to be best man. How are the mighty fallen! You didn't go to Capri for a honeymoon, did you?"

He tore the note in small pieces and tossed the fragments into the waste-paper basket.

CHAPTER II

HE thought over many things as he lunched off sandwiches and a half-bottle of Pontet Canet in his office the next morning. There was going to be little time these coming days for him to go out to lunch. Lingfields was getting into its stride. The work of the last three years was beginning to bear fruit. But there was a struggle to be made before the establishing of the business was assured. In the September of this year the first murmurs of that unforgettable battle were faintly audible. Carlo Maude, chief opposition, controlling Motor Transport, was already assembling his reserves. There had been a time, six months or so, before his marriage when Brockenholt had suggested to Maude an amalgamation. Now this morning Carlo had written to say such an arrangement was only possible on terms to which Lingfields could, as he must have known, never agree. So Carlo was frankly antagonistic, was he? Carlo was flattering himself that Motor Transport could match Lingfields in the open market? Well, so they could, up to a point. But beyond that point was where the balance swung to Brockenholt — public opinion. Little short of a public scandal which might lower Lingfields' good will, the general public would stand by Brockenholt; and the public using the new and highly organized method of transport, were the determining factor. That was Lingfields' ace of trumps. If Carlo was going to make a nuisance

of himself then that card must be played. But there wasn't room for both firms at the top. Somebody would smash. And that somebody, as every one felt at the time, would be Carlo Maude.

"It's no good fighting Brockenholt," wise men said. "He's too solid. He's got the public if he wants 'em. The business is based on the public confidence. That's his. If you get a chance, you'll find your money's safe with Lingfields — if you get a chance."

"And you will," said others, "you will. If they appeal to the public and you can scoop a few shares, do it. If this Maude fellow presses too hard it's Lingfields' opportunity. Come in on it."

And with Carlo's letter another had arrived from a manager of one of the sub-depots at Manchester. The depot had been opened recently and was the newest, one of the many pegs on which the lines of transport hung.

"There is some dissatisfaction amongst the men," it ran. "This is most apparent amongst the repair staff. Following your instructions we employed men who had experience of at least three years in shops. Several of the gang of foremen are fully qualified B.Sc.'s, only too glad to find work in this country which will give them experience. There are five men in this category, and it is with these we have had most trouble. Motor Transport have been negotiating for a piece of land at Salford. There is every reason to believe they intend to build shops there to keep their Manchester-Chester line in first class order. In point of fact we have already made contracts with Alkali Salts, Ltd., and with Bostrons the tea people, who wish to push their stuff New-

castle way. I don't think Motor Transport can compete against our fleet of twelve lorries, and they'll find the Eastern market already covered. Every one seems very satisfied. I learn, however, that the Motor Transport people have been offering very high wages for qualified repair-men. This looks to me like a stunt to put our men discontented. We don't want this to happen as things are just beginning to move. I thought you'd be keen to have this information. It isn't the men's fault, but it looks as if Motor Transport are going to have a smack at us. Perhaps the wind's in that direction anyway!"

Brockenholt was sure it was. The same thing was happening at Leicester, in Sheffield, in Durham. That of course was to be expected, but — if Carlo wanted a scrap, he should have it!

There was a board meeting this afternoon, and later, emphasizing his points with a smoke-trailing cigar, he outlined his plan of campaign.

". . . I think we're agreed that the terms suggested in Mr. Maude's letter on behalf of Motor Transport are ridiculous and out of the question. I don't know what you think, but I feel it's his way of opening hostilities."

"It's that indeed," said Naughton, a grey-faced Scotchman, and Brockenholt's General Manager.

"Then there's this letter from Manchester . . . it all points the same way . . . what do you suggest, Naughton?"

Naughton said:

"I'm very sure we'll have to fight the man. It's not the thing to wait awhile: we ought to start hitting at once. He can't touch Lingfields at the

moment. It's the general public that asks to be carried, and the big businesses that ask us to do their transport, and there's no one does it better. Direct action'll not be his method, I'm thinking ——"

"You mean?"

"He'll hope to injure us other ways than in direct competition on the roads. He'll be waiting to find a flaw in our morals. He'll not pin his faith on rounder wheels, but on disturbing the shareholders."

"You're a great fellow, Naughton," said Brockenholt. "You know your men. You're right. He can't beat us on the road, but he'll try to lower our prestige elsewhere. He wants watching, does Carlo."

"There'll be no one better to watch than you, Mr. Brockenholt," and Naughton smiled towards the Company Secretary. So this afternoon, round the long highly polished table, those half-dozen men of acute perception and commercially keen minds discussed in their amazing ways the possible counter-attacks that should be launched against the coming offensive of Motor Transport. And they enjoyed themselves as only business men of such capacity can enjoy themselves and the happiest man present was James Brockenholt. He liked a fight: he liked to hear the bitter quickness of Naughton's conjectures: to see how his colleagues like himself were eager to break a lance or two against their rival: to notice their determination, so very merciless, so very hard. He liked it because he knew these men felt like this, because he led them; because they respected and feared him, because Lingfields was in very fact James Brock-

enholt. All his life he had fought step by step, now the best battle of all should come, while Isabel waited at home, there as a fountain from which he could refresh himself, an inspiration to sharpen him, a flame to add to his fire.

He told her as much that evening.

"There's an exciting time ahead, Isabel. The time is coming when there will be only one motor-service and that'll be Lingfields. The opposition is beginning to put up a fight."

"That's Mr. Maude, isn't it, Jimmy?"

"Yes," he said, "it's old friend Carlo."

She asked shyly:

"Jimmy — it's always puzzled me — is it a silly question? — but if Mr. Maude is your opponent, why do you know him so well?"

Brockenholt laughed.

"I think," he answered, "that we both like to keep each other in sight. In a way our crowd are all more or less rivals. It doesn't do to admit it, of course, but we like to keep in touch. It's a glorious mutual suspicion."

"But," he continued, "we can beat Carlo. I'll tell you my plan. A nice title would suit me very well: it would suit Lingfields, too. This is where you come in, my dear. We will work it together, so for God's sake, Isabel, get on with these so-called friends of mine, they're going to be useful."

"But, Jimmy — a title? How?"

"Ever heard of hard cash?"

She had nothing to say to that.

"Oh, there's going to be a fine old show sooner or later," he repeated.

"And you'll win, Jimmy?"

He smiled down at her.

"I shall have to."

"But you will, of course. But, Jimmy dear ——"

"Yes?"

"You know, Jimmy, even if you didn't — though it would be dreadful, and of course it would never happen — even if you didn't, it wouldn't make any real difference between us, would it? I mean, we just love one another so awfully much that everything else seems so small and insignificant beside it. It's the one thing nobody could ever take away. The only people who could take it away would be you or me, and that's silly, because even if you wanted to let it go, I couldn't. And you wouldn't want to do it, Jimmy dear? Tell me ——"

He tilted her face up to his, two big fingers beneath the delicate curve of her chin.

"You silly little creature! How often must I tell you? Insatiable vanity of women."

But the shadow that had fallen across her face at her own self-torturing words suddenly, though he was getting used to the ache that frequently filled him when he saw her loveliness alight for him, made him catch his breath with a rush of passion, so that he pulled her close to him, his great arms crushing her, and his lips closed against hers. When he put her down, she laughed in a little trembling way, shyly ashamed of her own passionate embrace, looking for all the world like the child she was, and pulling him by the hand led him to his own big arm-chair in the study, where she pushed him down into the cushions and crouched, as she loved to, at his feet, her head on his knee, her cheek against his hand.

She was happy like this, with him so near to her. It was very comforting. It helped her to forget little things that already were beginning to trouble her. But, she thought, it was ungrateful to acknowledge, even in the smallest of ways, any of those small anxieties. If she told him this great house, and all the wealth and power it symbolized, terrified her, it would be poor return for all his generosity and loving kindness. But she wanted rather desperately to explain how difficult it was for her to manage the place. He'd seemed satisfied with his dinner, but he didn't know what a horrid time she'd had this morning ordering it. It had seemed so silly for Mrs. Bortle to ask for orders, when Mrs. Bortle was an expert and knew much better than she did. Mrs. Bortle must have thought her an inexperienced creature, not fit to be queen of such a palace. If she could have known Mrs. Bortle had told the chambermaid:

"Too good for 'im, she is, and I ses it. I ses to her, 'What will the orders be, Madam?' and she says, the pretty little dear, 'What orders, Missis Bortle?' 'For dinner, Madam,' ses I. And she blushes pink and ses, 'What do you think, Missis Bortle? Mr. Brocken'olt was very fond of apple-pudding down at Marlton.' So I does a soufflé, dainty-like. The master seldom eats sweets, anyway. But she doesn't know, poor little thing. She calls me back this morning and asks, 'Will you do the ordering, Mrs. Bortle, or shall I?' 'As you will, Madam,' ses I, 'but perhaps you would like to see to it now?' 'Very well,' she ses. But she never used the telephone, nor the car either. She must have walked round to the shops."

The chambermaid had tossed her head:

“Wonder the master didn’t look before he leapt,” said she.

Mrs. Bortle pulled out the flue with a rattle.

“You wonder too much, my girl,” had been her reply. “Them that wonders, flounders. Little dear she is and no mistake. Not like them other rackety females that used to come here to see the master, up to all sorts of games, and no good either, I’ll be bound. I would have been leaving if such going-ons hadn’t stopped. But I won’t now,” she added darkly.

But the chambermaid was a lady of spirit. “Those that likes to leave can leave, can’t they, Mrs. Bortle? I’m used to things very different.”

“And well you might be,” from Mrs. Bortle.

Only Lisette, to whom they had as yet not grown accustomed, had broken into a high warbling laughter:

“*La, la,*” she shrilled. “*Ohé.*”

“Well, what now?” the chambermaid had snapped.

“No matter,” said Lisette. “*Vous ne le pigerez pas quand même je le vous disais!* But Madam is too beautiful to — you say?— discuss.”

But Isabel, crouched beside her husband, knew of none of these things. If only, she thought, I could ask him. But her pride would not allow it for fear that he might be disappointed in her. And she felt a little chilly touch of loneliness. Those icy fingers of her unwelcome fear made her shiver, and the hand against her cheek moved and two fingers pinched her neck gently. There was this

question of a purchased title as well . . . was that quite right? quite — honourable?

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, Jimmy dear ——”

“Nonsense! What is the matter?”

“Well ——”

Perhaps, after all, she would ask him, confide in him. It wouldn’t be a bit nice though, and he might think her silly and perhaps not quite understand. But she’d better do it ——

“Well?”

“Was everything all right, Jimmy? Dinner — and — and everything.”

“Of course, silly one! Why?”

“Because ——” How futile what she’d got to say would sound!

“Go on!”

“Because — I wanted it to be!”

He laughed.

“What a strange little soul you are! Is that all?”

No, it wasn’t all and she knew it. But she said:

“I’m glad, darling Jim.”

The telephone bell rang and he went into the drawing room to answer it. As she listened to the rumbling of his voice, she realized she’d lost her opportunity. She wouldn’t have the courage to try again. What a little fool I am, she thought. But years afterwards, remembering that evening, she asked herself, whose fault had it been that the opportunity had vanished, his with his wide knowledge or hers in her ignorance, a child’s ignorance? She never found an answer.

CHAPTER III

THERE is a popular axiom that the young learn quickly. Like all generalizations it is but half-truth. It is forgotten to say that also the young learn hardly. The value of knowledge gained outweighs remembrance of the pains in that acquiring, but the first entry into new surroundings is often an agony only heightened by its later recognized futility. There is always an audience and stage fright is not confined to the theatre. And Isabel, mistress and as yet not mistress of the house in Fulham Square, was learning. Brockenholt, absorbed in the new developments of Lingfields, equally absorbed in the new delight of possessing Isabel, overlooked, like many a man in love, the very obvious. The glamour of his discovery of her, of the discovery of his other self down at Marlton that day when he had found his initials carved in the desk, the uprush of his passion for this sweet thing of youth, the reciprocation of that desire, its culmination in the marriage in the country church, the triumphant pageant of his awakened emotions, all tended to obscure the facts of Isabel's present difficulties within herself. He forgot blithely and completely that whereas he was at home in this old existence of his, she was at every turn confronted with small humiliations and despairs. He had swept her out of her quiet backwater into the turbulent midstream of his own affairs. He loved her as a man loves his own right hand, taking it for granted that it obeys his instinctive desires automatically and by

cause of nature. She was the concrete symbol of his aroused and inner self, striving for expression. He remembered himself in her, whereas she forgot herself in him. Devoted, intent on giving as much, or more, as, she considered, she had received, determined to understand and please him, she thought only of combating the difficulties surrounding her for his sake. But whereas his gift was coin of metal, hers was coin of her heart, and of these last there is no easy reckoning. Moreover, the dashing lover Brockenholt was a different person to the sophisticated husband Brockenholt. There was perhaps a touch of fear in her devotion, but a fear great only by reason of her own fear of failing or disappointing him. But that she loved him most passionately, most deeply, there was no doubt. Like a god he had marched out of the night to claim her; like a god she worshipped him.

She spent the first week in the house in Fulham Square in a series of agonies and delights. The routine of the house had to be learnt. Picture her wandering like a child from room to lofty room, finding, it seemed at every minute, some new thing to surprise her. She wrote to her mother:

“ You’ve never seen such a wonderful home, Mum darling. It’s so big that I feel like a little mouse in daddy’s potting shed! It’s so very different having everything done for you. You mustn’t even dress yourself or fetch things for yourself, or let anybody think you could help yourself in any way. I’m afraid I shall get awfully lazy, but now I’m what you called ‘a great lady’ I must do what is right. Jimmy is a marvellous person. He bought

me scores of lovely dresses when we were passing through Paris on the way back. Every day he brings some new present for me. What do you think the latest is? He asked me to call for him at his office yesterday and we went round to an enormous shop in Pall Mall. There, waiting for me, was a little yellow motor-car, all for me! Can you see me driving about in it? Isn't it too wonderful? Jimmy says he wants me to become the loveliest woman in London. I can't help thinking how difficult that's going to be for poor little Isabel. I'm sure I'm the happiest girl in the world. I *do* love Jimmy."

And Mrs. Luke, after reading extracts to Mrs. Brayham, wrote back:

MY DARLING ISABEL:

It was most gratifying to receive your grateful letter. I always felt dear James would be the man for you. You must not let your new environment bewilder you. I'm sure your father and I have always done our best to prepare you for the life of a lady. The Lukes have invariably found places of responsibility and position in the world. You will please give my love to James. Your father has a nasty attack of catarrh at the moment, but hopes soon to be better and to write to you. Elizabeth asks me to send her love and to say how much she misses you. My heart is a little better. The chickens from next door have eaten all your father's young lettuces. It is very trying. The grocer's daughter has returned from her long stay in Edinburgh. I fear the reason of her long sojourn is

not far to seek. It is such a pity when the lower classes forget what is due from them. The Master preached in Chapel last Sunday. Would you like me to send on your winter combinations, that you so thoughtlessly left behind? Lord and Lady Home give a party next week. We hope to go. We have begun fires already. I am glad to say coal is cheaper this autumn. Do not forget to be a good wife to James. Mrs. Brayham has cut out the announcement of the wedding in the *Times*. I found it pasted into her album the other day.

YOUR LOVING MOTHER.

P.S.— Please let me know about the combinations.

But a day or so later Isabel received a letter from her father. It was the first letter she had ever had from him and its contents somewhat puzzled her. Only latterly had she seen, by comparison, what a strange thing Archie Luke was. Somehow before she had taken him for granted in the little house at the corner of the Common, he had seemed like one of the bobbles on Mum's dress. Something a part of Mum's equipage, a necessary but small item.

MY DEAR DAUGHTER (he wrote),—

I should have appreciated a line from you before this. I understand your mother has heard from you. Nevertheless it doesn't really matter. Like flies, I am one of the accepted facts of this world. What with all the excitement at your marriage (I cannot conceive why!) I hardly seemed able to get a word in with you. Let me wish you now all those things I so badly wanted to wish you. Marriage is a difficult game and needs a strong admixture of common sense. I would like

above all things to know you are truly happy, and to think you had not quite forgotten one whose share in you, even if minute, is jealously appreciated.

Your fond father,

ARCHIBALD LUKE.

For some strange reason, unaccountable even to herself, Isabel tore up the first letter and kept the second. It was, indeed, while she was finishing writing to her father that the front door bell clanged to herald the threatened invasion of Miss Sophie Wontner.

“ . . . So Daddy darling, you mustn't *ever* think I'll *ever* forget you ”— she'd just written as the maid appeared at the door of her boudoir, with:

“ There is a lady called, Madam. Miss Wontner.”

Isabel dropped her pen.

“ Who?” she asked.

“ Miss Wontner, Madam.”

Wontner — Wontner! She knew that name, didn't she? Why, yes — and suddenly she saw again the crown of a gold and green hat before her, a white neck bared, with a string of jade beads resting against it, and a vivid memory of her own inadequate white blouse and pleated skirt. Instinctively she looked down at herself. But the sight of her slender feet in the long patent shoes, her ankles encased in silk, real silk stockings, and the soft folds of her blood-crimson tea-gown, dispelled that instant's nightmare. Even so she felt her cheeks grow hot.

“ Shall I say you'll be down, Madam?”

“ Yes — oh, yes!”

"And ask Waller to bring tea, Madam?"

"What? Oh — please — yes!"

She ran upstairs to her room. As she hurriedly powdered her nose her hand trembled. What was the matter now, she thought. She wasn't nervous, of course she wasn't. There was nothing so very dreadful about any one calling, it was the sort of thing to be expected. Strange, though, that the first caller should be Miss Wontner, who'd been down at Marlton with Jimmy — a friend of that Mr. Maude's, wasn't she? She seemed to remember that Jimmy had said so. Well, she would go down and tackle the woman . . . tackle her? That suggested a certain amount of animosity. That was funny, because, of course, she liked and admired Miss Wontner, although she'd only seen her at a distance, as it were.

Sophie was examining the gilt mirror over the mantelpiece in the drawing room as Isabel entered. She was very intent on the mirror it seemed. As a matter of fact Miss Wontner could see the door in the reflection and at the same time show to the best advantage the immaculate line of her small but lovely back in its cunningly tailored grey gabardine coat and skirt, with the red squirrel fur twisted appropriately over her shoulder, her umbrella propping her up. She only turned, with a start of feigned surprise, when Isabel was half-way across the room. Her red little mouth opened into a smile.

"Mrs. Brockenholt, how do you do?"

The tips of her gloved fingers touched Isabel's outstretched hand.

"We've met before, haven't we? Down in the — er — country."

"How do you do?" said Isabel, and "Won't you sit down?"

"I will," said Miss Wontner, "and be damned glad to do so. A hot autumn's hell in London."

"It is hot," said Isabel, and sat down opposite her caller.

Slowly and deliberately Sophie peeled off her glove. She loosened the catch of the squirrel fur and threw one end back from her shoulder. Beneath her hat two tufts of her flaming hair bushed out, vivid against her very white cheeks. She crossed one leg over the other.

"You mustn't think it impertinent of me to call," she said. "But it was so sweet of you to give up your chair to me that day when Jim — when your husband spoke in the College, and he and I have been friends for a long time."

"I think it's very nice of you to trouble to come round," replied Isabel shyly.

Miss Wontner smiled again.

"Not a bit. By the way, your husband's done a lot to the house, hasn't he?"

"You knew it before?" asked Isabel. "Yes, he's had it done up."

"I *have* dined here," said Miss Wontner. "Carlo — did you meet him, Mr. Maude? — and I used to come to parties that Jim — forgive the Christian name, habit! — gave here."

"I see," said Isabel.

Waller entered and there was little to be said whilst he prepared the tea.

"You take sugar?"

"Three lumps. Thanks. By the way, how's Lingfields?"

There was a sharpness about the question that disturbed Isabel.

"I think it's going very well, thank you. Jimmy seems very excited about it."

"He always was of course."

Something of that remote coldness that in later years was to be her best weapon came to Isabel on that remark. These cryptic comments directed against the godhead Jimmy were things not to be tolerated. She said nothing. She inclined her golden head.

But Sophie with a little twist of her lips and a mockery in her eyes, shadowed beneath the brim of her hat, leant forward:

"I asked you not to think me impertinent, Mrs. Brockenholt. Everybody always does, and I am. I can't help it. But honesty being my only virtue, I'll risk saying that your home is very beautiful."

What a strange person this little red-haired, self-possessed, vivid little thing is, thought Isabel; I don't understand her, but underneath I do believe she's kind.

There was, beside, a genuine note of sincerity in Sophie's last statement. The house was very beautiful, but beyond its mere outward glory Miss Wontner understood something of the motive that had prompted this renovation. She knew her Brockenholt very well, did Sophie, and sitting opposite this new acquisition of his she pondered deeply. Was this phase in Brockenholt to last; was he, like his house, renovated; or was it but a sudden flash that would sink again when the devil in him, that side she knew so well, should arise once more? Would the guilt wear off? It was not in her nature to feel

jealousy as such: she had too much philosophy of her own kind to let her emotions run away with her. Certainly on that hateful night when Jimmy had dismissed her, something beyond her all-covering practical comprehension had occurred. But she had stamped that weakness, she termed it as such, down in her mind. Now the sight of this shy slip of a girl before her awoke memory of that stifled emotion. But leaning back among the cushions, watching Isabel pour out the tea, she felt a sudden twinge of pity for her: a sense of loss for even herself. It was all so drastically commonplace. It was what every man did within his means. Yet, granting the fact of inevitable disillusion didn't perhaps this labelling of a woman with the name of wife, this outward show of affection, mean that most precious of women's desires, security? There were times when Sophie became tired of the endless race, with the pace set just too fast, running just above power. There was much to be said for marriage. But would this pale Isabel with the child's eyes and crudely sweet ways ever learn that this security was the better part of matrimony from a sensible woman's practical viewpoint? Had she raised an idol upon too lofty a pedestal, and when the statue toppled, would she be the sort of woman to build from the broken pieces something for her heart's comfort? Was she the kind, the only kind, who could realize love meant in such circumstances *safety*? Ah, well, these things had to be learnt, and no one could impart that vital knowledge to another. Poor baby, thought Sophie. I wonder if she knows about Jim and me? I'd like to put that straight if it's troubling her.

"I'm glad you like the house," said Isabel. Lord, but how the child flushed when she said that, knowing that all this had been done for her! I'd like to tell her, mused Miss Wontner, that paint gets dirty in time. But she said:

"Your husband always had excellent taste. I don't even need to see the house only, for that!" And Isabel was crimson.

Miss Wontner chuckled,

"You young brides! Good God, no offence! But — you young brides!"

Slowly the colour drained out of Isabel's cheeks. A white fierce light spread over her eyes, an angry, childish-insulted look. She would not tolerate this.

"I don't understand, I'm afraid."

Sophie tapped a cigarette upon the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Indeed I am, Mrs. Brockenholt. I wish I didn't speak out my mind. But you wouldn't understand and I wouldn't ask you to. Don't let's misunderstand, anyway. See," — she lit the cigarette — "You don't mind my smoking? See, I think James Brockenholt a very lucky man."

"Thank you!"

A great desire to laugh came over Miss Wontner. This virginal dignity, what a thing it was! Well, well. . . . She tossed the cigarette into the grate and picked up the squirrel fur.

"I must run along. Will you come and see me sometime, Mrs. Brockenholt?" She stretched out her hand, this time taking a firm hold of Isabel's icy fingers.

"I do wish you all and every happiness, please."

"Thank you."

Very well then, if the little fool wouldn't be sensible, she wouldn't. I can't change my spots, decided Miss Wontner, and I've done my best. Women are idiots, and I'm another I suppose to try and like Jimmy's wife. She'll learn.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Brockenholt." From beneath sounded the slam of the front door.

"Good-bye."

But as they reached the door, it swung suddenly open to admit the large form of James Brockenholt.

CHAPTER IV

“HULLO!” said Miss Wontner. “Hullo, Jim!”

And then Isabel made her first mistake. The accumulated little difficulties of the last week had tended to unnerve her. For the last half-hour she had been struggling with a situation she could neither understand nor handle. Sophie was to her, had always been since the occasion of their first meeting, an enigma. She had given this woman the hospitality forced by herself and had listened to a string of clipped phrases, which alternately pleased or wounded. There had been no question as to who had had the whip-hand. Sophie’s insolence (to any one else a little wiser, more at home in her own home, that behaviour would have been only amusing) had tightened imperceptibly the tension within Isabel. Now, like an answer to her prayers for a respite, Jimmy had returned early from the office. Jimmy was here, two paces before her; some one who would protect her and not let her be hurt any more. Her Jimmy who could deal with anything difficult and who would put this horrid woman in her place. She fled to him for that protection and on the impulse, without pausing to consider, flung her arms about his neck, with,

“Jimmy, how early you are! I *am* so pleased to see you.”

It was the natural thing for this child Isabel to do. But even as her hands touched his shoulders she felt him start back. He took her wrists gently

but firmly and loosened her hold. He kissed her perfunctorily on the forehead, and looking up she saw his face dark and thunderous, his deep eyes blazing with anger. He was not looking down at her, but over her head at Sophie Wontner, who, leaning upon her neatly rolled umbrella, was regarding the scene with a sweet and innocent smile.

"Dear Jim, how charming!" she murmured.

Instinctively he pushed his wife behind him, and with his eyes fixed wrathfully upon Sophie, stepped forward.

"How do you do, Sophie? You're just off, I suppose?"

Miss Wontner nodded brightly,

"Just off, yes. It was nice to see you, though."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Brockenholt — oh, don't bother, Jim."

His form still between his wife and her, Brockenholt opened the door,

"I'll see you down."

"Don't you bother."

"I will see you down."

As they descended the stairs, Waller appeared from the back of the hall and crossed to the front-door.

"All right, Waller."

The man quickly retreated at Brockenholt's furious jerk of the head.

At the door Brockenholt said quietly,

"I shall see you to the bottom of the road."

"I'll be off the premises in a moment, Jim."

He said nothing. The door slammed to behind them. They walked twenty paces before he stopped and fronted her.

"Now," he said very steadily, "may I ask the meaning of this?"

Sophie screwed the point of her umbrella into a chink of the pavement, and glancing up sideways at the wicked face above her,

"I said I should call, Jim. So I did."

That old sneer curved across his face.

"Do you want money?"

Miss Wontner sighed, exasperated.

"My dear Jim, it's very silly to insult me in that way."

"Well, what's the idea, please?"

She stopped digging with the umbrella and faced him squarely.

"I came here, Jim, in all good faith. I came to see your wife and to wish her luck. I came because, naturally enough, I was curious. Every one, except apparently that poor child, knows of our previous relationship. I came to call like a respectable woman to see if by doing that she would realize I meant to be friends. I should never have come again. You can believe me or not, but if that child *had* known I should have told her not to worry. I've finished with you, you poor thing. I should have realized that you'd marry a baby. Kidnapping, I thought, wasn't in your line. Apparently it is. You know I speak the truth, because you know I'm honest."

"But, good God," he exclaimed, "how did you know who I'd married? You base the motive of this preposterous visit on the assumption that my wife's less — shall I say — worldly than you!"

She laughed. "How did I know? My dear Jimmy, was I blind at Marlton? Anyway, it's not

my fault, is it, if both of you behave vilely badly and make a scene?"

"Get out!" he snapped.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away. A dozen yards from him she waved her dainty hand.

"You're too sweet for words, Jimmy, as a turtle-dove."

"Blast you!" he said, and returned to the house.

Isabel was still in the drawing room, crouched up in one corner of the sofa. Her husband flung himself into an armchair. The fire had gone out of his eyes but they were still cold and bitter.

From her corner Isabel whispered,

"Oh, Jimmy dear, I'm so awfully glad you came in. What a terrible woman!"

Brockenholt said nothing, but groped in his pocket for a pipe. It wasn't there and he swore softly beneath his breath.

"You needn't have done that," he said abruptly.

She raised her hands pitifully,

"What, Jimmy? What?"

"Made a fool of me."

She choked back the tears, her slim shoulders shaking.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy — I'm — so — sorry — Jimmy."

"Oh, all right!" and then, "What did she say to you?"

"She — who? Oh, nothing. Who is she?"

He rose to his feet and stood before the fireplace.

"Her name," he said, "is Sophie Wontner. You must have met her down at Marlton. I knew her years ago. We had what is known as an affair."

"An affair, Jimmy?"

"Yes, my dear girl. An affair. There is nothing more to be said. Are you satisfied?"

She rose and came to him and put her face against his coat,

"Satisfied, my darling? But I was never *dis*satisfied. It's nothing to me what you did before you met me, my dear. I only want you now. What is the matter, Jimmy?"

Yes, what really was the matter? What was he making such a mountain out of a mole-hill for, he thought. Was he coming perilously near to making a fool of himself — for nothing? Or was it nothing? Had Sophie and her confounded insolence upset him — or — dare he face that thought, or his wife and her forcing them all into this absurd tangle by making him ridiculous before that other woman? My God, but how Sophie must be laughing now!

"You ought not ——" he began, and then noticed with a violent sense of shame and horror that Isabel was crying against him: sobbing quietly and terribly.

"Oh, my dear!" he said. "Isabel, sweetheart! It's nothing, nothing at all. You mustn't cry like that. Please, Isabel! You mustn't cry. It's nothing."

And then her wet cheek was against his, and her smothered voice in his ear,

"I am so sorry, Jimmy, to be a little ass. Kiss me, Jimmy."

And as he kissed her he murmured,

"Nothing at all, my darling, nothing at all."

But with her head beneath his lips, her fingers gripping his coat, he thought — nothing — or was it . . . No, nothing at all!

CHAPTER V

BUT if the invasion of the house in Fulham Square by Sophie Wontner disturbed Brockenholt and frightened Isabel, the days that followed all tended to disperse any wayward unwanted thoughts in their minds. Painfully but surely Isabel took command of her duties. Lisette was proving her worth. That shrewd lady said little to Mrs. Bortle or to the rest of the household staff, but tended her young mistress with care and cunning art.

Dressing one night, Isabel asked her,

“Don’t you ever get tired, Lisette, spending all your days dressing up other people and not having time to dress up yourself?”

“Sometimes, yes, Madam. In my former place, I grew very tired often. Madam, there she go — this,” with an all-encircling gesture of her hands. “Very big. Ugly. But with Madam I am happy, thank you.”

“Because ” — asked Isabel — “because I am like this?” She imitated the gesture reversing the indication of it.

Lisette laughed.

“Ah, Madam makes fun of me! But I am happy here.”

“I’m happy too, Lisette.”

“But, of course. Monsieur is very fond of Madam in her gowns, which are so beautiful.”

That amused Isabel.

“Only because of my gowns, Lisette?”

“Monsieur is a man,” replied that wise woman.

“And you think men only like women when they are beautifully cared for? They like just their — their outward sort of beauty, Lisette?”

The maid folded the dress beneath her hands before replying. Then, “Once I was all in love with a poet, Madam. He too lived in Paris and came often past the window of the shop where I sewed. I was a seamstress then, Madam. We got to know each other, and he take me very often to the woods of Fontainebleau, and point out the stars. What a man! But I tire Madam?”

“No, no! Do go on, Lisette.”

“He was a good poet, they tell me. But I never read his poetry! Such stuff! He would talk for hours, Madam, about the flowers and birds and me. He tell me more about my soul, Madam, than I knew myself. He tell me, ‘Lisette, you are as beautiful as the little pink rose-petals.’ ‘You are simple beauty, Lisette.’ Pouf! He was a stupid man. We used to walk through the woods, hand in hand, till I say, ‘Do not we go now to eat somewhere?’ and he would say, ‘How can I hunger with you beside me, Lisette!’ It was very tiresome. Then I got acquainted with another gentleman who was a merchant. He sold cigars in a kiosk in the Boulevard des Italiens. I liked him very much. He bought me gowns, Madam, and gave me much to eat. So I leave the first man, because, Madam, I know nothing about my soul, but I do know when I am hungry.”

“Oh, Lisette,” said Isabel, “that was not very fair or kind.”

"Perhaps not, Madam. But it was good business. Women must make good business, Madam. Love is ver' good business."

"I think that's horrid," said Isabel. "It isn't like that a bit."

"Will Madam wear the silver gown tonight or the crimson?"

Isabel told Brockenholt the story, next morning at breakfast. She always insisted on rising the same hour as he did and taking the meal with him. He laid down his paper and smiled across the table at her.

"Well?"

"Wasn't it mean of Lisette?"

"I don't know," answered Brockenholt. "She seems a sensible woman." And Isabel dropped the subject.

Now from time to time came other callers to examine critically the bride of the great James Brockenholt. Mrs. Naughton alone aroused Isabel's interest. She was a tall, buxom woman, exceedingly handsome in her rather massive way, dressed invariably in clothes smartly unfashionable. Being exactly thirty years older than Isabel, she took it upon herself to adopt a maternal attitude towards her youthful hostess. Strangely enough that attitude suited her.

"I think she's awfully nice," Isabel told her husband.

"Do you," he asked and then, "I'm always frightened of her. I feel any moment she may want to bath me and put me to bed."

But that didn't shake Isabel's belief in what Brockenholt called "an outsize in Scotchwomen."

But Mrs. Naughton was the only one Isabel cared for. As for the others . . .

They were a wide and strangely assorted crowd, these friends of James Brockenholt. They were all of them immensely rich, from Carlo Maude and Horace Stanhope Svenk to Mrs. Proutopoli.

"They'll come and see," her husband told her; "they're all a dirty lot."

"A dirty lot!" Then: "But if that's so why do you have them as friends, Jimmy dear?" the words voicing her surprise.

"Why? Because they're useful. Especially Mrs. Proutopoli."

That seemed to her a queer reason for having friends, because they were useful. Down at Marlton you had known people either because the place being so small you had to, or because you liked them. The latter reason had always been Isabel's. Nevertheless Jimmy had said "they" were useful and she must do his bidding, as she would do anything in the world for him, so much she loved him. In point of fact Mrs. Proutopoli did not call, but wrote on deckle-edged notepaper to Mrs. James Brockenholt asking to be excused; "an effete convention," whatever that might have meant, being her reason, and suggesting that Mrs. James Brockenholt with her husband might care to dine at her house in Portman Square — "quite a small little party."

Growing already accustomed to a form of inverted exaggeration Isabel was not surprised to find the "small party" consisting of seven couples. This Portman Square house was incredibly larger than Brockenholt's. It was a monster of a house, ugly

and enormous and filled with priceless possessions. As is common knowledge, Timon Proutopoli acquired during the latter part of the war a considerable fortune. It is not to be believed, though, for one moment that Timon Proutopoli achieved financial kingship by illicit or dishonourable means. He had been in his way a kindly fellow with no spare moments. He had made money as men make bricks. It was a gift. He devoted his life to that accomplishment and at the height of success, when he was angling for a knighthood, died of congestion of the lungs, during the influenza epidemic of nineteen-twenty. At an age of forty-six, Mrs. Proutopoli, who years past had as a fine lump of a girl been wooed and won by the good Timon, somewhere east of the Grecian archipelago, found herself in a position, fortified by her late husband's downpouring dividends, to set about establishing herself in Portman Square as a lady of note. It is very much to the credit of Mrs. Proutopoli that she nearly succeeded. Now she was accepted leader of a floating society that drifted on one coast, as it were, towards the shore of lesser London society in the strictest sense and on the other swept the beach of what Timon had called "good big money." Through this sea, as always, the Israelites cleaved a way, crossing without getting their shoes wet from that despised shore of their own to the promised land of their desire. But only to the discerning might this undercurrent of moneyed snobbery and rather pitiful denial of race be apparent. Not many people who dined, danced and talked at Mrs. Proutopoli's recognized those casual, rather too commonplace-looking individuals who strolled aimlessly from

room to room, or sat nonchalantly upon isolated and gilded chairs to be members of a private detective agency. Only the very wide-awakes would realize that the two Rembrandts in the salon were spaced exactly to greet the incoming guests' bewildered eyes, regardless of the truly æsthetic principles of spacing involved. Brockenholt called the house "the flunkeyed museum," but that, though containing true criticism, was yet an exaggeration. It was very characteristic of him to attend such functions with a sneer. The reason was not far to seek. He had had literally no time at all to spend cultivating friends as friends, or culture as culture. Lingfields enveloped him. Nevertheless, acquaintance with "good big money" was a necessary acquisition for business. But he was not of this wide class. He despised them and scarcely concealed his contempt. Nobody else but James Brockenholt could, as Horace Stanhope Svenk put it, "have got away with it." But if Brockenholt ruthlessly shouldered his passage across such drawing rooms, it was certain that he in turn was disliked. Many a man would dearly have liked to see Brockenholt take a fall. Many a man knew how improbable that event was. Now this evening he was going to stride amongst them decorated with a jewel, lovelier, more brilliant than even their great possessions. Isabel was that jewel.

Tonight in the smaller drawing room, the one with the Whistler and Venetian glass, Mrs. Proutopoli, her very round white shoulders bubbling out of her black-and-silver gown, her black hair with most of the frizzle dressed out of it, her little black eyes like sloes, her short, lumpy figure, was talking

to Carlo Maude and Lady Lydia Wing of film fame, while Horace Stanhope Svenk asked Peggy Moulton if old Moulton was still on the track of Chelsea grotesques. Mr. Save Savour, that very Oxford novelist, confided to a tall freckled-faced young man that his only excuse for coming was that two situations of his new novel took place within this very room. The freckled young man, ill at ease beneath Mr. Savour's monocle, nodded from time to time and smiled helplessly. He watched the door with a certain anxiety, he perhaps being most curious of all present to see Mrs. Brockenholt. The remainder of the guests glittered and gabbled. Into this exotic mixture then came James Brockenholt and Isabel. Very shy, very lovely, white and radiant was Isabel: swaying into the room like a breath of early morning breeze. So that the freckled young man, Leonard Lang-Davies, invited who knows why, if not for his small "pull with the Press," burnt red beneath his freckles in recognizing this beautiful lady as the long-legged, black-stockinged Isabel Luke of ten years ago.

He stared at her, while Mr. Savour's words dropped unheeded. Little wild Isabel grown like this! Perhaps girls grew up, changed more quickly than boys! That colt-like lankiness had dropped into slim height, that tumbled mass of curls had become a golden crown. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes half-startled, half-alight with excitement. But he seemed to know intuitively that only too willingly would the legs and feet beneath the clinging gown have kicked that cloying magnificence away, and with short white skirt and brown shoes carried their owner out of the house, out of this confining tangle

of streets to where the track sloped straight to Barbary and the grass was good to run upon. A wild sweet thing caught and cared for, he thought, a wild thing that should be free. Well, perhaps she wouldn't recognize him now. He'd heard, of course. But supposing she didn't remember him? Did that matter? He knew it did. Somehow that would hurt him dreadfully, to think that those times were forgotten, when — he smiled at that memory's awakened picture — when together they'd poached trout down by Marlton weir, and when they'd walked in silence through the forest, each pretending that the other was very much grown-up and making up a queer romance that within themselves placed the other in rôle of hero and heroine. They had confessed as much one day. He'd like her to remember those things and the other things not said. Not, of course, that there had at that time been anything beyond the fantastic to remark, but now seeing her so splendid and so beautiful, those memories would be a lovely secret that was wholly innocent and could legitimately be denied to any one else. So he stared at her as only such a very young and honest young man could stare, hoping very much that she was happy, knowing her simplicity, trying to convince himself that the flush of her cheeks and the light of her eyes were signs of pleasure and not of bewilderment. Well, her husband was there to look after her. There was no doubt of how proud *he* was of her. So he should be! But proud . . . a dangerous wicked thing pride! Better to be humble with her, to be proud perhaps to be in a position to live beside her, not, never that, to be proud because she *belonged!*

Now Mrs. Proutopoli was shaking hands with them.

"So charming of you! And James — too."

Brockenholt swept the room with a searchlight of a glance. Ah! they were looking at her, were they! Well, let 'em look!

Isabel was nervous.

"Face of a Madonna," said young Lang-Davies to himself.

"Ah, Brock — how are you?" Carlo, very glossy and handsome, crossing the room. "Mrs. Brockenholt, you remember me?"

Shaking of hands, bowings, nods, ripple of conversation. . . . Carlo's voice in Brockenholt's ear.

"Congrats! Brock! She's a peach."

"Is she?" asked Brockenholt. "What the hell do you know about peaches, anyway?"

"Oh, quite a bit," replied Mr. Maude. "Quite a teeny weeny bit."

At dinner Isabel sat next to Horace Svenk with Carlo on her left. Opposite, Brockenholt saturnine but glowing watched her with possessive bold eyes. Fortunately Isabel had little need to rack her confused brains for conversation. Horace Svenk, who was also of a chosen people, kept her occupied in listening to the wonders of his native land.

"Why, the other night, Mrs. Brockenholt, after dancing past the clock I walked right home from South Kensington to Jermyn Street. It's some little march, I guess. I do think this town's got us beat someways, but I'll tell you where America can provide something you've not helped yourselves to. I couldn't find a fried-chicken carriage any-

where. You've got your coffee-stands, but it's fried chicken you want late at night. My, there's nothing like fried chicken for a tired man. In America we've got fried chicken carriages in all places. After leaving your road-house or hiking it for twelve miles under the moon, you stop your automobile by a fried chicken carriage. There's nothing to beat it. Fried chicken and moonlight." He smacked his lips reminiscently.

She was pleased with Mr. Svenk. He was amusing in his abrupt way and he twinkled when he talked. The more he talks the better, she thought, and then it won't give this Maude-man a chance. She was sure she didn't care for Carlo. He took it for granted that one liked him and he was quite intolerably handsome. It would be no good snubbing him, he wouldn't notice it. He was almost impregnable. He sat on her left, a chilly shadow that she drew away from. An absurd idea crossed her mind that once that shadow enveloped you, you would be lost. A shadowy web of a cruel spider; something that watched and waited, sinister and impassionate.

"And moosic!" Svenk told her. "My, but we've got some moosic." He traced imaginary bars in the air with a long-nailed forefinger. "America's the home of moosic," he said. "Now, there's a real sweet little tune, 'O Honey, when the silver moon is shining.'"

"Oh, but I know *that!*" cried Isabel.

"You *do!*" demanded Horace Svenk. "You *do!*" Every one does. I know the man who made that sweet little tune."

Carlo, with a sidelong glance at Isabel, whispered,

"The tune's better beneath the moonlight than fried chicken, eh, Mrs. Brockenholt?"

And Isabel blushed painfully scarlet. She felt the heat of her cheeks suddenly. The spider had crept from his dusky web and peered at her. How did he know about her and Jimmy? Had he waited all this time through dinner till the opportunity arose for him to let her know in this vivid way that he knew everything, was always watching, waiting. But his mocking face showed no malice, only — knowledge.

Carlo patted her forearm with the tip of a finger, "And very nice too, Mrs. Brockenholt."

She moved her arm quickly away from him.

"If that man," said Horace Svenk genially, "is vexing you, Mrs. Brockenholt, why I'll crack his ribs." He shook a knowing head at the smiling Carlo. "Now, that little tune," he continued, "that little tune, Mrs. Brockenholt, is published at fifty cents. My friend, who loves real moosic, made thirty thousand dollars over that song. There's nothing like being a genuine artist. I've purchased two very fine paintings over here this visit. After freightage they will have cost me together forty thousand dollars. A picture ought to be good at that price."

"Where'd you get 'em and what are they?" asked Carlo, leaning forward, his fork in the air.

"Why, I suppose I'm entitled to say," said Horace Svenk. "I got these pictures at Montori's, in Bond Street. One's by Leighton, and the other's a dear little thing my wife will just eat, by Orchardson. My wife's just crazy over Orchardson, Mrs. Brockenholt."

"Oh, yes," said Isabel.

"We've got an Orchardson gallery at home."

"Ah!" said Carlo. "They'll depreciate in value."

"Depreciate!" cried Horace Svenk. "Depreciate, Carlo! I'm certain these beautiful pictures will not depreciate, sir. They'll boom."

Carlo grinned.

"You want Piccasso and Marisse. I've only one Piccasso."

"Why, you've just wasted your money," said Horace Svenk. "You'll find that eventually the general public will come back to the real heart-stuff of life. This phase for brutality will wear out. It's sentiment we want. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes," answered the confused Isabel. This ardent appreciation for pictures was beyond her. Generally speaking a picture was a charming thing. Somehow it had never occurred to her to connect money with painting. A painter, she supposed, made a living as any one else did and with luck received due recompense. But in this case the recompense seemed to ignore the artist. Perhaps Mr. Svenk made a living this way? How then was he connected with Motor Transport? She'd heard he was. Did he have time for both or was it merely a hobby? It seemed, nevertheless, a strange method of appreciation. Neither he nor Mr. Maude had done anything towards constructing the pictures. And who fixed the values, anyway? The champagne was making her head ache.

"Wait and see," said Carlo, and emptied his glass.

But later, when that intolerable and racking meal

was over, and while Horace Svenk told James Brockenholt, "Why, your wife's a very intelligent woman, Mr. Brockenholt. She's cute on art," young Lang-Davies made his way over to Isabel.

"I haven't had the chance before! You remember me, Mrs. Brockenholt?"

And suddenly Isabel realized that this tall young man with the freckled face was the boy she'd known ten years ago at Marlton.

"Len, how *are* you? How nice it is to see you again!"

"And you too, Isabel," he said. "I ought to have called on you. I'd heard, of course. But there's so little time I find, nowadays."

"What are you doing exactly, Len?"

"I'm in Fleet Street. I'm writing a book too, Isabel."

"How lovely, and when's it coming out?"

He blushed beneath his freckles.

"It—it isn't finished yet, and of course I haven't shown it to a publisher."

"But you'll give me a copy when it does, Len? And you will come and see me, won't you? Ring up."

Brockenholt was at her side then. He eyed Lang-Davies sharply.

"Jimmy, this is Mr. Lang-Davies."

The two men bowed. Was there between these two at that first meeting, faintly apparent in Brockenholt's dark face, in Lang-Davies' sudden tightening of his lips and self-conscious acknowledgment, some vague antagonism? Was Lang-Davies' attitude towards his wife too frankly admiring, too crudely delighted, to be altogether pleasing to what

Lang-Davies afterwards alluded to as "the Lord thy God Brockenholt"? To those who knew him well that narrowing of eyes, lifting of lip, bespoke contempt in the great man. His philosophy contained a chapter on the position of "pups" in the world and the treatment of such a species. And this was a friend of Isabel's, was it? Very well, then, this friend should be but a friend of Mrs. Brockenholt. Isabel Luke was buried. Only Isabel Brockenholt lived, should live. Time enough for that, though. So Brockenholt said to his wife:

"Mrs. Proutopoli wants to speak to you. It's important."

So with a smile Isabel followed her husband across the room, and as they threaded their way, he whispered:

"She's been hit good and proper. Play it up, my dear."

Understanding little of his statement Isabel found herself wedged into a corner with her hostess.

"My *dear*," murmured Mrs. Proutopoli, "forgive me disturbing your *tête-à-tête*. But I seem to have only said, 'How do you do?' as yet."

She cocked her head on one side critically.

"What a lovely dress, Mrs. Brockenholt! Tell me"—she lowered her voice—"do you know where James bought those pearls for you?"

"I don't, I'm afraid," said Isabel.

"Never mind," continued Mrs. Proutopoli. "But I did so want to speak to you for a minute alone. I have a little scheme. Lady Wing and myself are arranging a Charity Ball in aid of the starving Armenians. It will be held here, though the date as yet is not fixed. Dear Timon had the ball and

reception hall built specially for me. We can take a thousand guests, would you believe it? The Armenian Ambassador will come, of course, and — and we hope — Royalty. Such a project is worthy of support. I hope, Mrs. Brockenholt, that you will come and perhaps — you don't mind my asking? Perhaps you would care to assist Lady Wing in her capacity of hostess?"

For a moment Isabel was nonplussed. She, a lieutenant-hostess in a great barrack of a place like this, surrounded by an overwhelming crowd of these incomprehensible people! Was there no end to these terrors? How was she to know that the far-seeing Brockenholt had only two days previously executed a pleasant little transaction in the way of increasing Mrs. Proutopoli's number of shares in Lingfields at a reduced and cunning rate? Not that such a transaction in any way savoured of a bargain. Certainly not, though, on the other hand, in such matters it was a foregone conclusion that there should be some semblance of give-and-take. Even so, who can blame James Brockenholt for making every preparation for the launching of his wife? Mrs. Proutopoli must find Isabel useful. Mrs. Proutopoli would be a great help in advising and capturing that title.

But remembering her husband's whispered hint of two minutes ago, "Play it up, my dear," Isabel, sacrificing in that moment more than Brockenholt could ever know, replied,

"Oh, Mrs. Proutopoli, how kind of you! You know how delighted I should be to help."

And in such a manner the first step in the establishment of Isabel Brockenholt was taken.

Driving home in the car, she told Brockenholt all about it. He nodded once or twice before answering. Then his reply was not in words only. He took her gently in his arms and kissed her. Quite emphatically that thunderous gentleman was pleased and in his pleasure she found her reward a hundredfold.

"They'll all be at your feet soon," he whispered.

But Isabel, comforted and happy beside him, looked up into his face, and stroking the rough sand-papery point of his chin,

"I don't care what any one thinks," she said, "as long as you love me, Jimmy."

Far and obscure at the back of his mind Brockenholt wondered if he was thinking that both statements were curiously enough inseparable from one another.

CHAPTER VI

THE Café Martinque, which lies somewhere between Shaftesbury Avenue and Coventry Street, has a reputation of its own. Here it is convention that friends are not necessarily to be recognized and that the art of eavesdropping may be a gentlemanly or rather businesslike action. To the Café Martinque go many of those people who wish to talk business. Stockbrokers, journalists, small financiers, art-dealers, buyers and sellers come here regularly to argue through their modest meal over such things as prices and the making of bargains. A week after Mrs. Proutopoli's small party, Mr. Carlo Maude might have been seen standing in the tiny vestibule of the Martinque, dabbing his lips with a lavender-coloured silk handkerchief and watching with a bemused eye each passing taxi. It is apparent then that Carlo was here on business. In due time, that is ten minutes late, Miss Sophie Wontner alighted from one of the taxis and greeted Carlo with a nod and a flick of her fingers.

"Upstairs or down?" she asked.

"Upstairs, it's quieter," said Mr. Maude, replacing the lavender handkerchief in his breast pocket, from which position a rather too apparent corner drooped against his blue coat.

He chose a secluded table.

"What are you going to eat?"

"Anything," said Miss Wontner.

He ordered it.

"We'd better have a cocktail," remarked Miss Wontner.

Said Carlo, meditatively spearing with the splinter provided the red ripe cherry floating in his drink:

"Well, Sophie, I don't believe I've seen you since we were all down at Marlton."

Sophie nodded,

"Quite right, Carlo."

Occupied with lighting a cigarette, Miss Wontner still found it possible to watch Carlo over the vase of cornflowers in the centre of the table. He was still occupied in stabbing the cherry.

"And how's things?" he asked.

"More or less as usual," said Miss Wontner. If he'd got anything to say he could say it. She wasn't going to commit herself. He'd got a rise out of her before — once; that night when she'd discovered Jimmy at Marlton making a fool of himself under that girl's window.

"I see," commented Carlo guardedly. "More — or less, as usual."

"And how are things with you, Carlo?"

He sipped his drink,

"More or less unusual."

Their food being brought, they ate in silence for some time.

"I saw Brock the other night," said Carlo between mouthfuls.

"Oh, yes."

"Pretty girl, his wife. Brainless — though."

"Oh, yes?"

"White or red, Sophie?"

"Just as you like, Carlo, I really don't mind."

"Well, red then, eh? Waiter!"

"He's doing well."

"Who? Oh, Brock, is he?"

"Yes," said Carlo, "very well indeed."

Last time he'd made her angry and it had worked. He'd try again. "Making thousands, I should say."

He broke bread daintily in his fingers.

"Lingfields are forging ahead, you know. Great man, Brock."

Miss Wontner sighed. In time, she supposed, he'd come to the point. In time. . . . Only wasn't that what everything was like? Waiting and waiting and waiting. It was very tiring. It made her long for a quiet spell once more, free from worry. Some people were lucky, they never had to plot and plan; life was smooth and easy, just as it was for Isabel Brockenholt. What a little fool that girl was! Carlo was right with his epithet "brainless." Why should she have comfort and security when other people had to live by their wits all the time? Somehow it was grotesquely unfair. And it was terribly tiring. Marriage was a foolish game, but it meant security. It was a long wearying business facing the storm alone, with no one beside you to cheer you up sometimes, to provide the money, the safety. Carlo was mumbling on, "Not the thing to do at all. I never had the chance. . . ."

"What?" she asked sharply.

"I was saying," said Carlo, "that Brock treated you damn badly. I say it, Sophie, because I must. You know how always I've felt so strongly for you."

Two little scarlet spots of indignation glowed for a minute on Sophie's cheeks, and as suddenly disappeared.

"I know that, Carlo. I appreciate it. But must we talk about these things?"

He leant across the table,

"How can I help it, Sophie? It's a thing I must talk about."

She shrugged her shoulders and with a pitiful little smile said:

"Poor old Carlo! I know what you're thinking. You've had to wait a long time, haven't you? It's funny, I think. We're funny. I laugh at everything sometimes because everything seems so futile really. Jimmy and me and you. You're the only one who's really hard, Carlo; and that's because you haven't got it in you to care much about anything except yourself. What do you want of me?"

"I want you," he answered, running the tip of his tongue over his lips. She rested her chin on her hands, regarding him shrewdly, seemingly attempting to pierce that polished veneer that covered his personality. Then raising her eyes and gazing over his smooth shining hair, talking more to herself than to him, she said:

"Do you? There are heaps of ways of wanting people, Carlo. You've got to pay always. Oh, not only in that way. What a rotten life this is when you come to think about it, and how beastly we are. I do think though that it's something to know how beastly you are. The whole show's so utterly futile and wearisome."

She laughed abruptly.

"I'm sorry, Carlo dear. Indeed I am. I'm not often given to sentimentality. Just lately though—oh, damn it! What's the proposition, Carlo?"

He ordered coffee.

"You're getting tired, eh, Sophie? You'd like a rest, eh?"

How strangely accurate Carlo always was! He seemed to know just where to probe. Perhaps, she thought, it was because he watched so carefully; lying in wait like a smooth shiny snake, hidden, in ambush, waiting, watching always with cold eyes. Yes, she was tired, dull and empty. Before Jimmy had found that girl . . . Damn that girl, with her stupid obstinacy and silly untutored ways! Why should a phantom thing like her take everything away?

"Well?" she asked.

"I'm ready to pay, Sophie."

"You're suggesting a bargain?"

"If you must put it like that."

"Go on," she said wearily.

"It's like this," he paused. "More wine? It's like this. You pride yourself on being honest — with yourself particularly, don't you?"

Right again! She nodded.

"So I'm going to be quite frank, Sophie. What I told you that night at Marlton was truth. The position is just this. You thought that Brock and you understood one another, that your relationship was based merely on friendliness and, shall I say, mutual convenience. You've found out, Sophie, old dear, that it hasn't been very easy to cut your losses. You're still sore, eh, Sophie?"

She was immediately furious. With a man like this, you felt trapped, caught in a web of your own making, helpless.

"I'm not a rabbit," she said, "thrilled with the idea of vivisection."

He grinned at her.

"I'm going," she said. "You can find me a taxi."

He made no attempt to stop her, but tilting back in his chair, said softly:

"Ah, Sophie, don't be offended. You must let me try and help you."

She was trembling, her lips quivering as she faced him.

"I do hate you sometimes," she said in a smothered voice. "God, how I do hate you."

"Sit down again," he answered. "Sit down and let's just talk it over, Sophie dear. Do see how much I want to help."

She made a futile unhappy gesture with her tiny hands and sat down again, her eyes very bright and angry, her face set and drained of colour. She bit her underlip. He pulled his chair alongside hers and laid a hand on hers. She took no notice of him but stared miserably before her.

"Now, now, Sophie, it's all right, my dear, but listen to me." He took a deep breath. Things were going very well, but go carefully . . . carefully.

"You're a very sensible little thing, and I've got a little scheme. Brock's not played straight with you, at all. It makes me very angry. Between us, Sophie, I never did think Brock was very straight with anybody. I'll tell you he's not been very straight with me. I owe him one or two," he added gently, "and so do you, Sophie."

She said nothing.

"Now listen to me, my dear. We'll get even with Brock."

"You mean that?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Brock ought to be taught his lesson. He tramples over everybody. Will you listen to me now, Sophie, if I tell you how we can get our own back?"

Listen! Yes, she'd listen indeed. She'd never forgive Jimmy for letting her care the tiniest bit for him. Illogically she felt she'd been cheated. She was miserable and very, very angry. Some one should pay for these latter weeks of pain.

"Go on, Carlo."

"Brock's made a fool of himself, Sophie, in marrying this little chit. I'm right, Sophie, when I say that if you want to, you can get him back."

"Well?"

"Get him back, Sophie. You can do it. You'll find this girl of his won't be able to deal with the side of him you dealt with. And then ——"

"Yes?"

"Well — then, if there should occur such a thing as — a — nasty little scandal. Brock's got a lot of enemies — divorce proceedings perhaps — then you might, in future, call on me to settle any little bills and that sort of thing, eh?"

Still she stared straight in front of her, silent.

"I might arrange an annuity, Sophie. There would be — haven! Brock deserves it. Are you going to let a little fool like that wife of his put you in your place? Are you?"

And to Sophie, sitting there, came remembrance of that afternoon's call, the insults of James Brockenholt, the behaviour of that inadequate mistress of the house in Fulham Square. She stood up.

"Very well, Carlo. It's a bargain. I'll do it. It's dirty, but we are dirty. It'll be too damn funny for words!"

"Dear old Sophie," murmured Mr. Maude. "We'll pull together, won't we? Now let's all cheer up. What about a *matinée*?"

Later in a taxi driving to the theatre Miss Wontner gave Mr. Maude a peck of a kiss on his cheek.

"Old swindler," she said. "You *are* a rotten lot!"

Mr. Maude beamed.

"That's a matter of opinion," he replied. "Business is business. We'll have a high old time eventually. And you'll be safe and sound, Sophie."

"With you, Carlo?"

"You bet," said Mr. Maude. "I'll start a little business for you right away. A little dance-club, eh?"

But that evening talking to his newly acquired partner, Horace Stanhope Svenk, who had sunk many dollars into Motor Transport Limited, Mr. Maude said:

"She'll do it."

"She will?" asked Horace Svenk. "She will? Gee, Mr. Maude, that's smart."

"That remains to be seen," mused Mr. Maude. "It's like this, Svenk. Brockenholt is too sure of himself. The fact is, he doesn't realize just what he is. I've known him a long time. There're two Brockenholts, Svenk. I've only just realized that myself. One's the side we all know. The other's something he'd not admit to himself, the side that's made him marry that little girl. Those two sides are going to clash, and that's where we come in,

eh, Svenk? When he finds Sophie again he'll hate that little girl, I'll be bound. And he is going to find Sophie, if I know anything about it. Every one knows what *she* is, eh, Svenk?" He examined his nails. "A nice nasty scandal, with the co-respondent a great — er — personal friend of Lingfields' rival, your humble servant, Carlo Maude, might make the public shy of putting their hard-earned cash with Mr. James Brockenholt. We can work the Press, Svenk."

"My," said Horace Svenk. "But I can see the headlines. 'Chief of Lingfields under influence of Rival's Sweetheart.' 'Deserted Childwife!' That destroys confidence."

"You bet," agreed Mr. Maude.

CHAPTER VII

THAT Mr. Carlo Maude was not incorrect in his surmisings may be seen by the conversation Isabel and her husband made one afternoon some few weeks later as they sat side by side on the slope of a meadow some forty miles from the house in Fulham Square. The car was drawn up at the side of the road below them. The Sussex downs tumbled away beneath, rising eventually to a great hunched hill, dark in the distance, a glimmer of the sea like a sword shining beyond one shoulder of the high grassland. It had been at Isabel's request that they had driven here. Preparations for the Charity Ball had been riotous for the last week. Mrs. Proutopoli had been almost continually on the telephone, Lady Wing had nearly quarrelled with two of the other hostesses. For Isabel, life had been red-hot and bewildering. Brockenholt, too, had been very busy. Lingfields were working at full pressure. The Manchester difficulty with the men had been settled but there was still an atmosphere of uneasiness in the district. The great fight with Motor Transport was developing. Shortly the time would come for Brockenholt to take Mrs. Proutopoli's advice. Timon had thoughtlessly died just when he had decided that the acquisition of a title was not a thing to be sneezed at. Therefore Mrs. Proutopoli knew the ropes. It remained for the ball to be a success. It had cost, Brocken-

holt thought ruefully, quite a bit already. Nevertheless it was eminently worth while, a decidedly good move in this game of wits and wealth. Now for this afternoon he and his wife were freed from the anxieties involved and could take a short respite. Moreover, he felt a long quiet talk would be beneficial. He could not realize then, as afterwards, that during this conversation both of them struggled in vain to reconcile their conflicting emotions. That day in his room at Marlton old "Eagle," that very wise old man, had been right: Brockenholt had a "lot to lose." Now, glancing at Isabel, lying on her side, her eyes fixed on the far-off sparkle of the sea, he asked her:

"Tired, my dear?"

She smiled bravely back at him.

"Yes, I am rather, Jim."

Divining her thoughts, afraid to acknowledge that his guessing might be near the truth, but against his will (that other self of him) he questioned:

"Like to stay here for always?"

She paused perceptibly before answering, and then she fenced.

"Would you?"

The question disturbed him. It was irritating to be foiled and made to search yourself. He replied guardedly:

"In some ways. Perhaps."

She sat up drawing her legs beneath her. Then:

"You love me as much as ever, Jim?"

He frowned.

"Of course I do. Why?"

"I wondered."

He rolled nearer to her and took one of her

hands in his. She was a constant delight to him — in some ways. She was so fair and beautiful and sweet, so eager to please and to do his bidding. This “tiredness” of hers at the moment nearly awakened remorse in that he had been the indirect cause of it. She was so small a thing compared to him, but how strong those bonds that held him to her!

“Why do you wonder?” Something within himself told him that this probing into their feelings was dangerous, yet, fascinated, he felt he must discover the hidden spring.

“You seem different sometimes, Jimmy darling.”

“Different?”

“M’m.”

As far as he knew he’d been “different” at no time. Why, therefore, this statement of hers? He must find out now, inclination or disinclination.

He shook her hand gently.

“Tell me.”

“It’s hard to explain. You’re different *now*.”

He laughed.

“Bless your heart! How?”

“I don’t quite know. It’s sort of funny. Down here now, for instance, you’re like you were at Marlton. But up there”—he noticed she didn’t use the phrase “at home”—“up there in London it’s another you.”

“Well,” he replied slowly, “that’s not so very curious, is it? People can’t always be the same.” The inadequacy of that remark immediately struck him. He must make this quite clear. “I mean to say, one reacts to environment and to diverse people.”

“It isn’t that.” She shook her head. “It’s

deeper than that, somehow. I think, Jimmy, I like you best like this. I'm not so frightened of you."

He chuckled.

"Silly baby! I don't frighten you."

Her face was very serious like a puzzled child when she replied:

"No! Not *you* frightening *me*, Jim. But some part of you does! It's the part that's not really you. The Marlton part is you. This other side is ——"

"Well?"

"Not so nice."

"What a little critic you are!" He laughed again to shake her out of the mood, but she only patted his hand that lay on her knee and gazed steadily towards the dancing sparks on the distant sea.

"Will you tell me something, Jim dear?"

"I won't promise."

"Why did you marry me?"

He was suddenly shocked. The absurdity of the question! What was the matter with the girl?

"My dear," he answered. "What next?"

She turned troubled eyes to him.

"Oh, Jim, don't be angry!"

"I'm not angry."

"I knew you would be, but I had to ask."

The colour rose darkly in his cheeks. This was getting idiotic.

"I tell you," he said. "I am not angry. Naturally enough, I'm wondering what you're driving at."

Her mouth trembled.

"I'm just being honest, Jim. Don't read more into it than is there!"

She looked down at him wistfully with a strange

expression. "Like an old woman," he thought. It was a look he'd never seen in her eyes before, and it surprised him as the unexpected words or knowing look of a child sometimes startles the observer. He realized for the first time that this young wife of his was in fact a separate, almost unknown, person; that his dominant personality in some way failed completely to envelop both of them and that the mere fact of marriage alone could not entirely submerge her individuality. To man that marries woman comes in time this realization, when the first passionate phase is ending and the purely physical, if only by repetition, loses its primal thrill. Is it not then that the mounting love seeks freedom from the toils; when the spirit, tangled amidst the dark roots of physical being, seeks to rise upwards through the binding earth to sunlight and a serener life, a green small plant of love thrusting out of the soil, striving to grow till its topmost branches reach to entangle the very sun itself? Now with Isabel, ripening, the roots of her love fast set in that dear soil, becoming aware of that maturing and the desires it brought, struggling desperately to express those as yet half-understood yearnings, Brockenholt found himself at a loss. He looked upon her with new eyes, seeing with amazement that she had become woman, fearing almost this deeper fuller prompting of her spirit, and for the first time in his life he was faced with a problem beyond his comprehension. For in this blossoming of love are, as with all birth, many pains. By her words, showing very clearly to him that she too within herself keep secret counsel apart from him; by that old wise expression of her eyes,

he knew her for a stranger: some one that he as yet had not captured for himself, a jewel indeed, but a jewel with a living destiny of its own. But in love, whose name is legion, but yet one, when this seed of spirit breaks its shell to expand and push out delicate tendrils, when this love, as no other thing can, bears of its own accord fresh birth of itself, lies the ever-recurring danger at each rebirth of quick susceptible death. Then very humbly, with eagerness to comprehend, should Brockenholt have sat at the feet of this sweet Isabel, and tried to help her discover the concrete desires of her soul's great unfathomed wish, but being himself a dark man full of impatience and obstinate knowledges, he felt ashamed to think a matter such as this should be beyond his sphere of understanding. The girl was being wilful and irritating, so he said:

"What is it you want to say?" and said the words in such a manner that she shook her head helplessly, in a terror that she might tell in answer too much or too little. But summoning her courage she answered:

"I only wanted to know, Jim, to get things a bit clear."

"Well, isn't it all clear?"

"Not exactly. You see, Jim darling, I want to know what you want me to do, *really*. It seems that my chief function is to run your big house and make a big splash. But you can't have married poor little me for that only, because I'm so dreadfully stupid at these things. I don't see how we can do both."

"Both?"

“Yes, dear Jim. Both. Do all that and — and ——”

“Well.”

“Oh, my dear,” she said, “one wants children, doesn’t one?”

So that was what she was after, was it? Well, why couldn’t she say so straight out without all this dilly-dallying? Anyway, there was time enough for that. At the present there was too much to do, and she couldn’t be laid up three-quarters of a year when things were beginning to move. Another thought came to him, that, given children, this love of hers would be divided, and where indeed would he be? Had he married this child for her youth, a fountain to refresh him, in order to allow her to give that youth to a somebody else, another child who would be depriving him of that precious possession?

“Doesn’t one — you, Jim?” he heard her saying.

“Of course I do, my dear girl, but not yet.”

Even as he spoke he wondered if his statement was but a half-truth. Yes, a certain part of him did want children, would like to take her away from the business of the present life and give her these things. But the beast in him, that creature in half-possession who hungered for power and great wealth and things not of the spirit, things to be seen and handled, also reminded him of its desires. And at that moment he lost for ever his opportunity.

“Oh, come on,” he said, “it’s getting chilly, we’ll be getting back.”

As they stepped into the car Isabel paused, looking back to the green meadow where they had sat, seeing through a mist of tears a green grass patch

amid the wood and hills that was too like a burial-green for small bodies, a cemetery for small bitterly relinquished hopes.

“Jump in, my dear,” said her husband.

In silence they drove back to the house in Fulham Square.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM about this date, the editors of gossip columns in the daily and (particularly) the weekly Press discovered a new and remarkably prolific source of information. Notes and "short pars" were received from a gentleman who styled himself Mr. Save Savour. Two autobiographical novels by his pen, "Personally Speaking" and "A 'Varsity Egoist," had already been published. Though the art, indeed an art it is, of writing "pars" is not one too commonly pursued by men of such æsthetic tendencies, the Press found Mr. Savour's gossip notes very readable and extremely useful. Naturally enough, the paragraphs, as usual, were unsigned, yet on the other hand strangely enough they dealt almost invariably with the same prominent people, who were: James Brockenholt, "the beautiful Mrs. Brockenholt," Mr. Carlo Maude, and that well-known and rather shocking young lady, Miss Sophie Wontner. A certain maliciousness gave piquancy to Mr. Savour's comments. Two or three of them are worthy of perusal.

In the *Illustrated Weekly Looker-on* appeared a photo of James Brockenholt and Mrs. James Brockenholt. Beneath the caption ran:

"A widely-known magnate and his wife.

"Mr. James Brockenholt, as is well known, is the man at the wheel of Lingfields, the rapidly growing motor transport service whose estimable

endeavour to make motor transport, on an organized and large scale, the equivalent of the railways is becoming recognized as a national asset. It is universally recognized that Mr. Brockenholt is one of the coming Big Men in Modern Commerce."

In another issue of the same paper appeared a quarto-size portrait of Miss Wontner.

Readers were informed that "this wickedly clever little dancer, Miss Sophie Wontner, is now giving a series of Eurasian Tone-dances at the Essex Gallery Cabaret, which, we are led to believe, is partly financed by that brilliant man of parts, Mr. C. Maude. Mr. Maude is also known as a clever business man. In our portrait Miss Wontner, delightfully if dangerously clad in an Asian robe of pearls and brilliants, is executing the first movement of the Babu's Impulse. It is needless to add that Miss Wontner's clever dances are satirical in theme."

A harmlessly vicious weekly paper asked: "If a certain recently married would-be millionaire was in any way irritated by a rival financier's interest in a little lady formerly of his acquaintance? And if little ladies could influence men of commerce?"

Indeed, little by little, by dint of repetition the general public, more especially the higher levels, came to realize that James Brockenholt was a very great man, that the lady, his wife, was very young but very beautiful, that the notorious Sophie Wontner had joined forces with Carlo Maude. This propaganda was extremely well done, and Mr. Save Savour received suitable recompense for his services from — Mr. Carlo Maude and Horace Stanhope

Svenk, the co-directors of Motor Transport Limited. But this latter fact was unknown.

In due course the Charity Ball organized by Mrs. Proutopoli and Lady Wing was given publicity, and it became known that Royalty in the person of a Russian Prince would honour the occasion.

Now the night of the ball had arrived. All that day Isabel had been in a state of feverish anxiety and excitement. Realizing now the part to be played as dictated by that God-like, not-to-be-refused husband of hers, she had made every effort to prepare herself.

At dinner Brockenholt put her, as it were, through her paces, for the last time. When she was dressing he looked in now and again, casting a critical eye over her apparel. Lisette's fingers were busy for a long hour. As they stepped into the car, he told Isabel:

"This show's going to be fine practice for you. I'd like you to keep an eye open for this Prince Vladimir fellow. It's the sort of connection that suits Lingfields. He's got money. Not nervous, are you?"

"A little bit, Jimmy, but nothing really."

"That's a good girl."

But she was nervous; more so because she felt that her husband as well was a little on edge. Watching the street lights flash by, catching sight of her pale reflection in the glass attached to the side of the saloon, she experienced a desire to snatch the diamonds from her neck, gather her skirts around her knees and, opening the door as the car slowed down at the traffic blocks, to jump out and

escape among the passers-by. But she deemed that impulse unworthy in that Jimmy wanted her to be like this, Jimmy whom she loved till she was one ache of love for him, who had given everything to her, whom she wanted to please and win praise from. Moreover, she was not feeling very well. Somehow she seemed to have taken very little exercise these last months. Perhaps after tonight's performance there would be a period for rest. Life had been such a rush that there had seemed no time at all to think over important things for her and Jimmy; not affairs like this, which she couldn't help feeling were not very real, and were more like the fantastic kaleidoscopic impressions of an eternal nightmare. Almost unreasonably she felt that the rarefied atmosphere of her present mode of existence was stifling her; the whole world seemed central-heated and the very air artificially disinfected. This rôle of behaving as a grown-up married woman was becoming irksome. At Marlton, walking over the downs with the lover Brockenholt talking gay nonsense and only being serious when he bent to kiss her, she had been herself. Now when she skipped about the place the sedate reproach of the husband Brockenholt's regard made her feel on such occasions self-conscious and chilled. At this hour, every one in Marlton was just about to go to bed: Daddy would be scratching the tobacco ash out of his pipe, snuffling the fumes out of his nose, while Mum, her feet propped on a stool, read an out-of-date novel, and probably at this moment was carefully bending down a corner to mark the place for the next night's inevitable routine; lights would be fading suddenly out in bedroom windows; the sound of footsteps

would be clattering only seldom down the cobbled road; somewhere very far away a dog would be barking, and out on the downs the climbing moon would crown Barbary and the Hackpen Hill with a rim of silver. . . . The car slowed down, stopped. A confused blaze of lights, a crowd on the pavement, a strip of red carpet, above a striped awning with scalloped edges.

“Here we are!” said Brockenholt.

The starving Armenians should have been forever grateful to Mrs. Proutopoli and Lady Wing for organizing the Charity Ball. Much “good big money” was collected to assuage their hunger-pangs. Prince Vladimir arrived in course of time, being as Russian as possible and twitching his thick curling eyebrows in aristocratic disdain. The Armenian Ambassador, his wife, and two daughters, were present: semi-millionaires rubbed shoulders with theatrical celebrities. Mr. Save Savour talked about himself, Carlo Maude nodded cheerfully to people he didn’t know, the ball was a great success. Yet amongst this so wealthy, so very smart immaculate concourse, did there step gingerly, rather horrified, certainly bewildered, two or three or more ghosts of former tenants? Surely it was enough to cause them traditionally to turn in their graves, and turning to awake, and awakening steal out of their confining tombs and make their way to this one-time home of theirs in Portman Square, to find out what all the noise and hubble-bubble was about, and if it might not be Gabriel summoning all men and some women together for the last grim tribunal? Yet, maybe, some small reward for their disturbed slumbers might have been given in a

glimpse of a young girl, discernible from time to time. Who should not say if some wise old ghost, ruffles a little mouldy, satins a little creased, hose wrinkled, followed this living graciousness from room to room, snuffing ghost-snuff from a phantom hand, and experienced again an old forgotten longing to take those white fingers beneath his arm and say, "My dear! this is no place for *us*." Leading Isabel to some quiet and solemn refuge where he could question her. . . . "And they like this, my lady. And you? It is very different." Others of his kind may have joined him, feeling once more a live thing's feelings, knowing how impossible it was for them to speak their secrets, realizing that the barrier of years and empty death were bridged by that sentiment, "No place for *us*!" And when that wilful thunderous man at her side edged way through the crowd to force an introduction, when a black, white-cuffed arm encircled that waist and incautious and insolent fingers touched for a moment, almost by mistake, the bare flesh of that half-exposed back, did the ghostly escorts, with one accord, start forward to intercede, to protect, only to realize how futile, unseen, and vain their unfelt fingers were? But of all that concourse, one woman only would they have attended.

Young Lang-Davies, present in a more or less official capacity, leaning against one of the Corinthian pilasters of the ball-room, just where a door opened on to a secretive little hall with discreet nooks, smoked a cigarette. The slithering of feet, the roar of conversation, the swing and drop and lift of the band's syncopated rhythm, were a far-off drumming in his ears like the unheeded grumbling

of the surf on a near-by shore. The faces swaying past him seemed all exactly the same: no gown appeared more gorgeous, more striking than another, for all the gowns were gorgeous and striking, and relativity breeds contempt. "A type of snobbishness on my part," he told himself; "but, by God, what a roomful of cads!"

Once or twice he had seen Isabel, noticed Brockenholt like a Satanic guardian-angel hovering in her vicinity, a dark influence behind her prompting her in her part, watching the effect her indisputable beauty made on other people. Without effort, he had seen how Brockenholt had gathered about her "the right people," and how genuinely respecting her loveliness, instinctively fearing her husband, "the right people" had responded to her shy advances. Like a guardian-angel too, Lang-Davies had followed her at a safe distance feeling certain that she hated this futility, that she was in a state of high nervous tension, that she wanted to go home — go to *real* home! Prince Vladimir of royal blood — "too bloody royal" Carlo had declared when the noble Russian had turned his back on him — had been, Lang-Davies knew, the objective of Brockenholt's manœuvres. Several times Isabel had been hustled away when the Prince's tall figure had risen like a pinnacle over the range of heads. "Obvious," this freckled young man had thought, "obvious and typical." But at last the introduction had been arranged. The too-apparent look of pleasure in Brockenholt's face had been galling. Now, leaning against the wall, in this backwater Lang-Davies searched the crowd for Isabel, wondering if she too was as bored as he was, wait-

ing for a chance to speak to her. Then suddenly she was coming towards him, and even as he prepared to greet her, he realized that she was not alone. By her side, rather flushed, well-supped, walked Mr. Carlo Maude. They almost touched him as they passed through the doorway to find a seat in the little dark hall. He noticed how Isabel paused at the threshold and how the worthy Carlo urged her forward with a touch on her arm; and how she withdrew that slender arm quickly, wincing from those hot, dead white fingers with the line of black hair down their length. A great desire to seize Mr. Maude by the coat collar and kick him severely came over the young man. Physical violence would be the only thing that Carlo—"that greaser"—would understand. But by reason of civilization, which prevents estimable young men from kicking less estimable and predatory older men in public places, such a thing might not be. On the other hand, though eavesdropping was repugnant to him, Lang-Davies stayed where he was, within half-a-dozen paces of Isabel and Mr. Maude, waiting in case . . .

And as he stood there James Brockenholt, with Prince Vladimir, took up a position at the other side of the door. There was no doubt that Brockenholt knew where his wife was and who she was with. That in itself was quite clear, yet as he talked Brockenholt cast anxious glances into the secluded nook. Indeed, that man of schemes was annoyed. It was just like Carlo to take Isabel off when the Prince was searching for her. As if it hadn't taken half the confounded evening to get the Prince to notice her, and if James Brockenholt

knew anything about it, this noble gentleman should find Mrs. Brockenholt to be the loveliest woman present and should before long be at her feet. The Prince's susceptibility for English ladies was well known. Very well, then, Brockenholt had decided, Isabel should make a pretty bait, and this roomful of outsiders should realize that this young wife of his could knock 'em all silly. If he could keep the Russian here for a few minutes longer Isabel would emerge. And the Prince had not as yet taken supper. . . .

But of the incident that followed there were, besides the four people involved, but two other witnesses, one was Leonard Lang-Davies and the other was — Mr. Save Savour. Was it because of this latter gentleman's presence that in the morrow's account of the ball an "amusing incident" was recorded?

As the band stopped, there came from that dark corner a little cry half of anger, half of terror. At the same moment Brockenholt edged the Prince towards the doorway. But as that regal personage entered to request Mrs. James Brockenholt's company and a dance, a thing engineered with much tact and subtlety by her husband, the lady herself, her back greeting him, facing the unchastened Mr. Maude, stepped suddenly back with another exclamation of disgust, and struck the instep of Royalty a penetrating jab with the razor edge of a high heel. Royalty swore in Russian: heels upon an instep covered only with silk sock and the thinnest of patent leather can be excruciatingly painful. Royalty, forgetting itself, hopped. Maude, with a grunt, rose from his corner, Mr. Save Savour smiled and

looked away, but Isabel, trembling and with tears in her eyes, all confusion and shame, could only gasp:

“Oh! I beg your pardon. I am so sorry. I am so dreadfully sorry!”

Royalty bowed and, gingerly putting foot to ground, murmured:

“Madame’s privilege entirely.” And, with a charming smile — retired with dignity!

So much then for the plots of mice and supermen!

Carlo, like the Arabs, silently stole away. Mr. Savour, meditating, followed.

The little hall was deserted in an instant save for Isabel, dazed and terrified, facing her husband, whose great clenched hands and blazing eyes tokened the wrath and disappointment that he for the moment was incapable of expressing by word of mouth. But when at length words came, Lang-Davies, frozen to his post of vantage, overheard a deep voice say brutally cold and measured:

“What in the name of God do you think you’re doing?”

“Jim!” — what an agony of fear and shame in that spoken name — like a call for pity — “Jim! that horrible man tried to — to kiss me.”

“Who?”

“Mr.— Mr. Maude.”

“Well?”

“That’s how it happened, Jim. I couldn’t help it.”

And then again that hateful voice:

“Well, what the hell does that matter?”

“But Jimmy darling ——”

“Don’t shout! I know. I repeat, what the hell

does that matter compared with what you've done?"

Silence then except for a queer, deep, stifled gasping, the sound of tears.

"Stop that noise, for God's sake. Don't we look fools enough as it is? We'd better get back. Get your things. What? I don't know what excuse you can make, and I'm damned if I care!"

And then Lang-Davies fled, almost running from the emptying ball-room, collecting his hat and coat with a frenzy that startled the passive footman, clattering down the steps of Mrs. Proutopoli's mansion, running away from the temptation to do, this time, murder only, to dig fingers into James Brockenholt's massive throat and squeeze the life out of him; walking rapidly away anywhere from that museum of a house, trying to tire himself till the echo of that cry of pain "Jim!" and the dreadful noise of that uncouth and pitiful sobbing should sound no more, haunting him who had, to his mind, seen an angel smirched, an angel bruised and whipped.

III

INTERLUDE

“Narrow is the gate that leadeth . . . unto life.”

CHAPTER I

AUTUMN returning; the leaves of the beech tree opposite the house in Fulham Square twice reddened, glorified for winter, since Mrs. Proutopoli's dance at Portman Square . . . two autumns and now the season's pageantry again. The old tree waits for sleep, the leaves shake. Everywhere there is the murmur of a late business, a last preparation for the dark months. Petals of flowers are rain-sodden, scattered on the grass, dissolving in death, completing the ever-recurring inevitable cycle of the year. The soot on topmost branches is two years' thicker. The paint on the Doric columns fainter by two years' measure of grime. Before the seven steps, twenty-five yards on either hand, lies a three-inch depth of tan. Silence, autumn-misty over the garden, silence and suspense within the house . . . sleep and rebirth, life leaving, life quickening. . . .

There is a darkened room within the house, a room on the third floor with a window open to the Square so the highest branches of the beech tree can watch what happens in there. There is a coming and going, a sweet sour smell of ether, a professional look about a uniformed woman, a white-coated man, a scrupulous efficient look about the bed. On the bed, white and drowsy with pain, the mistress of the house . . . rustling of branches, clinking of instruments . . . life leaving, life quickening.

So long had she been down in this pool of unconsciousness that fantasy and fact seemed one. She

was very ill — she must grasp that fact before she sank again. If she seized a fact when she was near the surface of consciousness, somehow she seemed able to take it down with her to the depths, and at each recurrent awakening it was at hand, something almost concrete that helped her to re-discover herself normally. The idea was born that she must collect these facts to use as weapons against the phantoms that pursued her when the delirium throbbed through her once more. Then the facts seemed steps of a ladder by which, of her own volition, she could rise out of the shadowy corridors of her benumbed mind. Always was this fear that she would get lost and never find a way back up to daylight from these stupendous limitless depths of imagination. Truth was, suspended between oblivion and normality, she rose and fell in this fathomless pond like a fisherman's bait, raised and lowered at some other decree than her own. Now actual pain was a thing relatively small beside her agony of mind. Occasionally it swept up through her in great heaving spasms when the chloroform shook clear. She almost welcomed its advent as something comprehensible upon which her brain could fasten, driving those other thoughts and fantasies from her. Something beyond this illness was troubling her, something she couldn't remember or grapple with. That loss of memory terrified her with its sense of overwhelming omnipotence. There was a name she could call upon which would assist her in this blind struggle if she could only remember it.

"Jim," she cried.

A voice in her ear, trying to comfort, a soft voice. Was it real?

"All right, dearie. Better soon!"

Whose voice was that? Then a quick vision of a woman's face near her, a white cap, two eyes looking down, now all disappearing except those pin-pricks of eyes, receding, advancing — a wave of agony; a pad close against her mouth and nose . . . down, down.

"All right, nurse."

She wanted to cry out to them to stop, to leave her alone. She wasn't "under" yet. "Not yet," she tried to call, but that name tricked on to her lips by her subconscious agony, echoed in the room —

"Jim!"

Now the nightmares again. There was great height above her, great depths beneath, all around an intolerable space. She was floating slowly down, all things invisible, but all things sensible. Then the dream quickened. She was standing on a narrow ridge, immeasurably high, on either side a cloudy obscurity concealed the abyss. Before her the ridge, a razor-like path, ran straightly upwards to where a peak burnt dazzling white in a strong radiance. Between that welcome light and herself other clouds veiled the path. She was walking towards the hill-top, toiling painfully, her limbs heavy. She knew she must get there. She knew that achievement to be vastly important. When she was there, she would be able to speak, and her words would be listened to. The thing she had to say must be said. Darkness closed around her, gusts snatched; swaying against destruction she struggled on. She was in the middle-mist. Monsters of shadow and cloud rose up, sweeping alongside, brushing past her.

Realization of unutterable depth came to her. The tip of the peak, a white-hot sugar cone, was visible before, nearer. Only a little longer, she thought, and I shall be through this obstruction. But on the thought the darkness in front became opaque, woolly and impregnable. Then she remembered it had always been like this; always had she got so far but only to give up at the bitter last. Agony at the realization was acute. Once on the peak she would be able to speak. That accomplished, everything in the future would be all right. Something was between her and that height. If she could only call, but the syllables of some mystic word were forgotten! Somebody was ahead in the sunshine, somebody she wanted desperately, somebody she would never reach. She struggled, slipped and fell. The mountain peak toppled, wheeled — darkness again and a terrible wrenching feeling inside her. She opened her eyes . . . bars in front of her, wooden forbidding bars, another obstruction. She was so exhausted with her climb that she could not move. It almost seemed as if she was tied down, yielding to the arms of that all-encircling darkness. Bars in front, cruel and forbidding — “caged.” I’ll keep quiet, she thought, till I’m more accustomed to this new terror. I’m in a cage. A prisoner. . . .

By a table near the window the doctor, washing his hands in a basin, looked over his shoulder.

“That’ll be all right, nurse.”

“Yes, doctor.”

By another basin the nurse, busy washing not her hands but something else. Clever, careful hands, busy, trained, cunning hands. . . .

Still in prison! Wooden bars still there! Who had put her there? Why? Ah! now she knew. Jim had put her there, because he didn't trust her. She moaned. She was too weak to call out and ask him to let her go. Ah! the terrible anguish of that. Jim to put her there, because he imagined she might run away. If he'd only come and speak to her, she would tell him how wrong it was to put her in a cage like this, because she'd never leave him, would always wait beside him in case a time should come when he should want her. Even now she'd stay always, always because she loved him so, though it had been hard sometimes, and he'd never known, would never know, the secret tears she'd shed. Dear Jim, she pleaded, let me out, let me out. Don't you know I love you still? Ah! she remembered now why Jim had found reason to put her in a cage and make her a prisoner. He was frightened she knew too much. She must go through in her mind all those things that had happened to make Jim feel like this. Then she would call for him and argue and ask him to release her from prison. How far must she go back? Her mind cleared. Yes, that dreadful night a long, long time ago. There had been a dance at somebody's house, a big dance, and a terrible accident. . . . Memory returned with agonizing sharpness. She could hardly bear to think of that night. Now she remembered only too well! She had failed him, and on the return home he had said nothing, letting her go to sleep on the cold far side of the bed unloved for the night, sobbing herself softly to sleep. . . . He'd never given her opportunity to apologize.

Yes, that had been the beginning. She must

connect that event with the present, but there were gaps in the narrative. If she kept on thinking, she hoped some other thing would return. Words floating to her. . . . "You'll have to learn, that's all." That was a link surely? "You'll have to learn . . . learn!" Now ——

She was in the drawing room, waiting for Jimmy to return. It was very late. The servants had gone to bed and the fire was sinking, a shroud of white wood-ash covered the darkening coals. The room was cold, but her hands were not chilly with an external temperature. They had frozen stupidly stiff two hours ago when she'd found the piece of paper that she still held by a corner. At first she hadn't realized what it signified. Now she knew. It had fluttered off his desk in the library when she'd entered to look for something to keep her company, to read till Jimmy should return. Often he was out late. Business. . . . She was too cold to move. If only God would send one icy, relentless blast of wind through the tall windows to freeze her, to kill her sharply and at once. But no cold death would come, only at length, Jimmy, and Jimmy wasn't God — now! Of course she ought to have known. Perhaps that was why Mrs. Naughton, kind busybody Mrs. Naughton, had questioned her so repeatedly lately, looking down at her slantwise anxiously, trying to discover if what every one else knew she knew. Did every one else know? Ah! but she hated their pity, if they did. "One has to take the ups and the downs, my dear," Mrs. Naughton had said. "Ups and downs." Would she too come to think of things in this way, calling Heaven "ups" and calling

"downs" Hell? And men? How shameless and wantonly cruel. Better to have told her; she would have tried to understand. Now, suddenly, she was lonely, shut out, waiting on the threshold of his heart with the door fast closed, locking her out . . . locking her out. . . .

But when he came in eventually, she could find no words to tell him clearly her anguish. He was surprised to find her up so late. She could see him now, standing beside the door, straightening his tie, his cheekbones sullen red, his cheeks white, as they always were when he'd been drinking. He was obviously discomfited at finding her waiting for him. He smiled woodenly.

"Hallo! Still up, my dear? And the fire out?"

She faced him, her eyes dull and tired, her mouth very firm but pitiful.

"Yes! I waited for you. I had to."

"Had to?" He was puzzled.

"Why?" he demanded, instantly suspicious. He moved towards her, and she started back, swaying a little. For the life of her she could not answer him like this, directly and brutally.

"What's the matter? You ill?"

She shook her head. He regarded her fixedly, and then with a grunt sank into a chair and searched in a waistcoat pocket for his cigarette case.

"You must be ill," he said. "What is it?"

Then she said: "I found this."

He plucked the slip of paper from her dead fingers. He recognized the address at once, the name of a house-agent. He had no need to re-read the note. One sentence only leapt into flaming significance: ". . . The purchase being satisfactory,

we would be glad to know if you wish to take the lease in your own name or that of the lessee (Miss Wontner), an early reply . . .”

But he never took his eyes from hers. Deliberately he folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket. For an eternity neither spoke. The clock ticked loudly and the cinders in the grate rattled through the bars.

“Well?” he asked. The word was a menace.

“I found it,” she repeated. And then with a bitterness unexpected, “Oh, dear God! Why did I find it?”

He bit his lip, and —

“If I say I’m sorry ——”

She shook her head wildly.

“Oh, Jimmy! How could you? How could you?”

He clicked with his tongue impatiently.

“Now look here, Isabel, it’s not a bit of good making yourself ill about it. As a matter of fact, it’s nothing!”

“Nothing?”

“You women! My heavens, Isabel, a man’s affairs don’t concern his wife if she’s sensible.”

She came suddenly to life then, the colour crimson in her cheeks, and arms outstretched. She spoke very softly.

“Sensible! Sensible, what’s that? Am I to be sensible, Jim, when you’re — you’re keeping another woman? Dear, dear, don’t you understand what that must mean? It’s not my love that matters, Jim, nor myself, nor my feelings. Not that. It’s not the shame, Jim, nor the pity other people will give me ——”

"They don't know!" he exclaimed.

She nodded sadly.

"Not know? Dear, if they don't know now, they will. Oh, it's not that. It's this only. You never came to me and told me you must go — like this! You went and left me to find out, and if you had told me, dear, I should not have made a fuss. I would have been so proud — so proud to think you had told me. I might have helped. That's all I wanted, Jim. To share things. It must have been *my* fault — failing you. But I tried. I tried so hard. You might have trusted me. I'd never stand in your way, if you want to go."

He rose from the chair, his face turned away from her.

"I don't want to go," he said quickly.

"Then tell me, Jimmy. I'll try to understand."

"You're a woman!"

"I'll try, Jim."

He glanced at her sharply.

"See here! It's no good, Isabel. No amount of explanation makes such matters any better. Any man knows that. As you've found out, you'll have to accept it. It makes no real difference to you."

"You won't trust me?"

"Good God!" he replied savagely, "I don't know what you're talking about — this trusting business. You'll have to learn, that's all."

"Yes, you'll have to learn, that's all!" That's all. How long ago was it now? She was becoming confused again. The wooden bars before her grew larger, receded, blurred . . . "learn, that's all" . . . the darkness was deepening, she was sinking. Now pain afresh, swelling, thrusting through

her; a sticky sweetly smell suffocating; pain ebbing, down . . . down. . . . Dreams once more. She was swimming in wide waters, warm and deep and infinite. Far above her head, directly it seemed above the apex of her brain, a star shone. Strangely, when she strained to look upwards to catch sight of its hopeful radiance, it glided just beyond her range of vision, like a speck before the eye. She must see the star, because once seen it would drop nearer, till it settled almost upon her and then at length would burn up all the waters with its heat and set her free. If only the intolerable weight of her head would allow the necessary bending backward. At the effort, she felt her head toppling, snapping her neck. She was drowning: thunder of waters, darkness. . . .

Breathing was easier now. Ah! she could see those wooden bars again. Came a confusion of pictures and faces: Jimmy's, Leonard's, Mrs. Naughton's, Mother's. She groped for memory. Yes, there was something else to be rehearsed, before she could call for Jimmy to let her out of prison. Coming. . . .

A fresh clean smell of — what was it? — sharp and sweet — firs! Firs and fir-cones! A wood, by Barbary. No, not that! A voice singing far back in her mind, a husky voice, "Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming! Stars a-dreaming — oh, I want cher! . . . want cher!" Why did those idiotic lines make her want to cry?

Then another clear picture.

Jimmy was just out of his bath. The razor was rasping over his chin. She was standing half-dressed by his side and saying:

“Can’t we, Jim?”

He grimaced at himself in the mirror, pulling down one side of his cheek with forefinger and thumb, the better to reach the bristles that hid beneath his jaw-bone. He wiped the razor on a fragment from a roll of paper.

“What d’you say?”

“Can’t we go, Jim. Just you and I — to Majorca. Only for a short week?”

It was a last desperate attempt at recapture. There, where the sun was bright and the sea deep blue, where the outside world was cut off, with him all to herself and memories, she might find the lover of those first days: where the waves toppled on to the shelving beach and the houses were white in the strong light.

“How can I get away?” he parried.

She was asking for trouble, she knew that. But she must make the attempt.

“Naughton can carry on, can’t he, Jim? I would so like it.”

“Of course you would. And when I come back I should find everything in a muddle.”

“But Naughton’s a good man. You always say so.”

“I dare say he is. But what, my dear girl, do *you* know about business, I’d like to know?”

No, she knew nothing about business, but wouldn’t he come, for a week? Wouldn’t he see the pleading of her heart behind the assumed carelessness of her tone?

“How can I get away when Lingfields is just starting on this big campaign?”

“Then you won’t.”

"No," he replied. "I can't and I won't. Bless my heart, haven't you got everything you want?"

"No," she answered slowly, "no dear. It's you I want."

He snorted.

"Why must you talk to me when I'm shaving?"

"But you've finished, Jim."

"Well, I want to dress. Really, Isabel, I can't understand you. I give you all I can; you've better clothes, a better home than ninety per cent. other women. I can't do more. You're greedy!"

Greedy! My heart, but that was cruel. *Greedy!* And somewhere the sea broke on a dusty shore, where Jim had loved her, before she failed him. . . . Locked out, she was now, locked out. . . .

The picture dissolved in a half-conscious mist of acute discomfort. She felt sick, and was aware of vomiting. The spasm cleared her mind. Still, she could see the bars before her. Between reality and fantasy she was poised, drowsy, but more comfortable now. She began to consider her whereabouts, gave up the attempt contentedly. She was so exhausted, that only sleep mattered. Sounds of the room became distinct and intermittently very sharp, piercing her brain; a tinkling, a clinking, and as it seemed a rapid clapping of hands.

In the Square the beech tree is shaking its leaves to attention: twig nudging twig, then a long deep rustling sigh of wind tilting through the branches. The autumn haze, last breathings of the dying flower-petals on the grass, draws a grey cloth of shadow over the gardens, half-way up the front of houses. A sign of day completed, hours covered,

hope of hours to come signifying — life leaving — life quickening. . . .

Where had she been this eternity? swinging down and upwards through dreams, where should she awake? It was so difficult to remember clearly her starting place. She pieced the puzzle painfully. She had been on a long journey. That was why she was so tired. Now perhaps she had come home. Home? Somehow. It was a distasteful word. Home meant a repeated twelve-hour loneliness; an ordering, an arranging of her house, of Jimmy's house. What an age ago it must have been when she and Jimmy climbed the hump of Martinsell, and watched the evening shadows draw lengthening patterns on the flat wide plain of the Pewsey Vale beneath! Or Majorca and the sun! or the moon a disk of silver, a shield hung above the columns of Barbary. Home and marriage! What a queer thing was this joining of man and woman together for eternity: "Which is an honourable estate." Was it? Did that depend upon the parties of the contract, or because God and a priest had said so? It was funny that love was taken for granted, but only if it was "honourable." There must be two sorts of love then, one recognized and lauded, the other ignored yet condemned. And yet, love meant only one thing — a long giving and a gladness therein. Was it a sin against the Holy Ghost to refuse love? If that was so, Jimmy was already damned. Had he not refused her love, hoisting a screen of indifference and cynicism between them both?

The wooden bars were still there. She heard

a moaning near by, and suddenly realized the sound was of her own making.

A voice, "Better now," flicked her abruptly into consciousness. She was not in prison, she was in bed. The rails at the foot immediately ceased to mean terror. Instinctively she stretched out her arms, feeling somehow that there should be reward for this dark journey. She was immeasurably glad.

"There, now."

A movement beside her, the displacing and rearranging of sheets, a warm blanket close against her breast, a clear and ringing message flashing into her brain . . . looking down, within a foot of her face two small, wide, blazing, blue eyes in a red orange of a head: two eyes blazing that message up to her, filling her with a passionate sense of tears and praise.

"A fine boy," and Nurse smiling benignly at her. She looked up gratefully.

Miniature Jim, wriggling beside her, scrabbling with pink soft nails at her neck, new small Jim who, by his minute presence, dried up all her tears, was the sum total of existence, burning up all sad things past and to come; new Jim, whom she could shape to her heart's desire, some one who'd be glad because she loved him and would take willingly and greedily. She wasn't locked out now, the door was wide. The gates of Heaven were not such as this. . . .

As she shifted her arm to draw him closer, she heard her husband's heavy footsteps on the stairs.

IV

REALITY

“. . . that which thou sowest is not quickened
except it die.”

CHAPTER I

AT the age of six Robin Brockenholt worshipped an unorthodox Trinity. Reluctantly he placed God in first place of authority, Isabel a good second, and then Leonard. Daddy was beyond his comprehension: a somebody bigger even than God, and with, he imagined, the minor characteristics of Satan. Not that he disliked his father, but, having learnt that caution and cunning were necessary when approaching him, he took him as an accepted fact better left alone and only occasionally investigated, with an eye on a line of retreat, as an interesting phenomenon. God he knew well and intimately, being in frequent conversation with the Deity and on the best of good terms. Of all Powers God was one of the nicest and easiest to deal with. He didn't answer back nor possess inscrutable "big" ways. Isabel was, he secretly admitted, akin to God, but having questioned her one bedtime as to whose sovereignty was more worthy of his zeal and devotion, he had been forced to concede only second place to her. He lamented this fact for some little time. Having invited heavenly advice and found a satisfactory reply within himself, he conceived an admirable plan. In its execution he discovered in his father a trait which later led him to think of Satan and his parent as allies. It was a first conscious rupture.

Behind one of the larger trees in the Square gardens and near to a noisome but intriguing

potting shed, mouldered a high rubbish-heap of leaves and flower-pots. This place, assuming for the moment an almost Sinai-like importance, was to be the area allotted to the ceremony that once and for all should settle the harassing assignment of God or Isabel to divine right of the universe. With consummate skill he had dodged nurse, by an assumed loitering near the rhododendron bushes, till with a quick and frantic run he reached the hallowed ground, forbidden by authority on the score of dirtying clean clothes. As if clothes weren't worn but to be dirtied! Arrived at the mound he had selected two of the largest flower-pots and with infinite care placed them upon the soggy summit. Round them he had heaped a wall of mould and decaying leaves and triumphantly crowned his temple with a broken slate. This accomplished, ritual was essential. He had broken a button off one of his shoes by dancing round the shrine to the accompaniment of "I love God, and I love Mummy."

Isabel, wishing to bid short good-bye to him before she accompanied her husband to a lunch at Mrs. Proutopoli's, had found him kneeling before his work, and with clasped hands and upturned blue eyes praying, "And so I hope you'll be happy ever afterwards. And if you're not it's your own fault."

Brockenholt, impatient of delay, had followed her. He was not more than twenty paces behind when she asked:

"Pob, darling! whatever are you doing?"

He said "Amen" loudly twice, and then, surveying her with a wide grin: "Marrying you and God."

Brockenholt, his foot tapping on the grass, called:
"Come along."

"One minute," and Isabel bent to fasten the broken buckle.

Her son stroked the ospreys on her hat with grubby fingers.

"Pretty hat," he remarked, and then seeing his father scowling at them both: "Daddy's waiting, mummy."

"I know. Keep still, darling," said Isabel, and then: "Why were you marrying us, Pob?"

"Because," he replied, wrinkling his small brow, "because you ought to be married to God, and then" — with triumph — "you're both equal."

"The buckle's broken, and you'd better run in and get nurse to mend it," she said to cover her laughter. She knew the child too well to risk hurting his feelings. "A bunch of nerves," Brockenholt had once called him.

"Come now," cried Brockenholt, and noticing her smile, "what's he done?"

She told him, and at that, hot with being kept waiting while, as always now, this small intruder was attended to, he jerked out:

"Well, it doesn't strike me as being particularly humorous. We're late, as it is, and we'll be later while you encourage blasphemy."

He'd not meant to whip her like that, this morning. He had been in a particularly good mood till four minutes ago. But punctuality was chief of women's vices, best virtue of his own. Didn't she have enough time to spend with the child, as it was, without this perpetual interference of his own plans? Nevertheless, he nearly apologized a

moment later, but withheld the words, as nowadays he was always restraining such phrases. He laughed it off in the car, watching Isabel slyly, but the formality and aloof regard of her eyes cut him short. They lived much within themselves these days.

But Pob had heard, understanding less of the actual words than the irritated gestures and the flickerings of empty anger. From that date he had decided that Brockenholt was beneath satanic influence.

Notwithstanding this decision he found life a delicious thing. The house in Fulham Square was big enough to provide adventures. His nursery he cared for little, but the box-room off the top landing, next to Mrs. Bortle's bedroom, was a palace. Packing cases and old trunks covered most of the floor and a dismantled bed leaned against the wall behind the door. The window was small and high, with a strong ledge and, having enlisted the sympathetic assistance of Waller in moving two boxes to climb upon, he had made for himself a seat close against the pane, an aerie from which he could just discern the traffic passing to and fro beyond the precincts of the Square. When Isabel was out and it was not one of the afternoons on which Leonard called to play with him, he would mount the boxes and beat upon the sill with fat small fists, humming to himself and inventing romances. The angle was too acute for him to see the lower windows and bases of the houses opposite, but the top stories and the chimneys especially were friends of his. Mysterious things were always occurring, lights going up before bedtime in winter, blinds being lowered or raised, and once, to his great delight, among his beloved

chimney-pots, he watched three workmen crawling over the roof to fit telephone wires. At least, Mrs. Bortle had told him the three cautious figures were electricians, but he knew better.

"They're not," he contradicted her solemnly. "They're leprechauns."

"Bless the child," said Mrs. Bortle, "and whatever may them be?"

He was not sure himself, but that didn't prevent him telling her: "They're sort of little fairies and little men all mixed up together. They live in the bottoms of trees and climb up sometimes."

"What for?" asked Mrs. Bortle maliciously.

"To see, of course" — and as a trump card: "Leonard told me!"

"Did he, now," said Mrs. Bortle; "and what else has Mr. Davies been telling you?"

"Lots," said Pob deeply. "He's very nice. Mummy likes him."

"Whatever next?" cried Mrs. Bortle, and sighing, "Poor young thing!"

"Who is?" demanded Pob.

"Me, of course" — hastily. "Now don't you fall down, Master Robin, and mind them nails." As she retreated from this too-socratic argument, he shouted after her:

"Good-bye, poor young thing!"

"You mind what you're saying, Master Robin!" retorted the indignant Mrs. Bortle.

The pantry was another cheerful place. Often he'd stand against a shelf, watching Waller busy with the silver. The glitter and glow pleased him and he liked Waller. This spot he treated as sanctuary — somewhere to hide from the ever-recur-

ring embraces of Lisette. He had once caught Lisette in a similar predicament with Waller. He knew she'd never venture to follow him into the pantry, where his high-pitched ribaldry, called forth whenever the butler and herself were discovered together, could penetrate upstairs.

But best of all he loved to sit beneath the grand piano in the drawing room, while Leonard played and Isabel rested in the deep armchair by the fire. He was never so happy as then. It was thrilling to wait for the taut strings immediately above his head to start their rumbling or tinkling tune. Moreover, Leonard's shoes were an added delight. Often they were nutty brown and high shining, and with a burnt match it was easy to dig out the accumulation of polish from the little holes decorating the uppers. Leonard was always so pleased to have the holes picked out clean.

"You'll have to be a cobbler," he told him.

"No," said Pob, "I'm going to play a pianner like you," and Isabel and Lang-Davies had exchanged glances.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Leonard. "There's your father."

From time to time he interviewed Brockenholt in the study beside the drawing room. He neither dreaded the minutes spent there, nor looked forward to them. They puzzled him. It was difficult to converse with Daddy, but he was invariably polite. Those talks took on, in time, a certain formula. They opened with the question:

"Well, been a good boy?"

Answers varied, but his reaction to that genial question was always identical. At once it brought

home to him a sense of inferiority and littleness. It made him feel that the big dark man beside him was asserting authority, chilling him, patronizing him. And it was quite useless to try to explain his passion for chimney-pots and why he'd given them all names; why he liked Leonard's shoes and Isabel's rings, and what a marvelous person Waller was when known really intimately. These visits were things to be avoided, if possible, and to be got over quickly. Yet often the sound of his feet pattering rapidly down the passage, the slamming of the drawing-room door, or the shrill squeaks coming from the room where Isabel sat, made Brockenholt swear strange oaths for a stranger reason. To all these others his son revealed himself: to him alone he retired behind his small dignity. In this only did Brockenholt find himself lacking and faced by failure. He'd not wanted the child, but the child was his own, usurper though he was. But the usurper of what? Isabel's love? He shrugged mental shoulders at that. There was no fault to find with her now. Yes, he'd put her through her paces, and she was polished and groomed and very worthy. But this son of his was different. A queer delicate thing, hurt quickly, pleased easily, but pleased never by him. That was why from time to time he called the child down to him to talk in private. The thought of those others observing Pob's indifference to him was intolerable. The talks were private practice. But Pob went his own way.

Now eight years from the marriage at Marlton, the house in Fulham Square had changed its aspect. When on that autumn afternoon Brockenholt had brought his bride to the seven steps, it had shown

to Isabel a glorious and welcome front, newly painted, garnished for her especial delight: to Brockenholt it had been a small but fitting home for a wife of his. But at this time, to Isabel it seemed a prison, to Brockenholt an insignificant and wholly inadequate home for as great a man as he was rapidly becoming. The lease was expiring, and already he was considering a choice of greater and wider dimensions. He was certain of his wife now.

Notwithstanding the publicity which Mr. Save Savour had given to the "amusing incident" at Mrs. Proutopoli's ball, Isabel had from that date established herself. She had, Brockenholt congratulated himself, "learnt." Amongst the circle to which he belonged, she moved easily and gracefully aloof. At first her suddenly assumed sophistication and chilled indifference had worried him not a little, but when he realized that this cold dignity of hers roused envy not only in Mrs. Proutopoli's heart, he had become exceedingly gratified. From his standpoint she was, in all outward ways, admirable. He was proud of her and proud of himself. Few men, he imagined, could train as he could. And above all he was sure of her. Since that night, six and a half years ago, when she had discovered his return to Sophie Wontner, no word had ever been passed concerning his more private affairs. Nor since that date had he seen Sophie nor heard from her. Indeed, within a week of that night, he had told Miss Wontner:

"I'm sorry, Sophie, but it can't be done."

"But, Jimmy ——"

He had, characteristically, cut short explanations and argument.

"I don't intend to explain. I apologize," and with that he had left her, much to her own dismay and the disappointment of Mr. Carlo Maude. Carlo had been very angry.

"My God, but you had him."

Sophie had lost her temper.

"Do you imagine I'm congratulating myself, Carlo?"

"Well, it's bust our idea!"

"But there's plenty of time, Carlo. If we only wait."

"On the principle that absence makes the heart etcetera, eh?"

"I hope so."

And as Mr. Maude, a specialist in the art of waiting and watching, approved, no pressure from Sophie had been put on Brockenholt, and the affair ended, as Horace Svenk put it, "in unholy smoke." But Brockenholt himself, saying no word to Isabel, had experienced a certain satisfaction in relinquishing his pleasures. It amused him to think of his wife pondering a sin that did not exist. One day he thought he would tell her what a silly little thing she was to jump to conclusions; meanwhile, the situation pleased him. Her suspicions exploded should be the lump of sugar that the good dog received for performing "trust." But Carlo waited patiently.

In this year matters were reaching a climax between Lingfields and Motor Transport. Seven years before wise men who knew had advised:

"If you get a chance, you'll find your money's safe with Lingfields. If they appeal to the public and you can scoop a few shares, do it. If this Mr.

Maude fellow presses too hard it's Lingfields' opportunity. Come in on it."

By now Lingfields' opportunity had arrived. Month by month the competition had become keener, and those first murmurs of the struggle to come had developed into the thunder of the advertising artillery.

"Neck or nothing," the wise men said.

Large sums, directed under the careful instruction of Mrs. Proutopoli, had found their way to Homes for Disabled Miners, Orphans' and Widows' Benevolent Funds. People who knew wondered how long it would be before the name of James Brockenholt figured in an Honours list. They nodded wise heads. "Not so very long. Next year!"

And Brockenholt, aglow with the thrill of the game, spared neither his staff nor himself. Naughton, that sour and canny man, grew grim and miserable, as was his custom when a fight seemed won. Workshops with the red "L" in a blue circle blazoned on their roofs sprang up all over the northern counties. The circled "L" on lorries and chars-à-bancs was seen on every high-road running neck and neck with the yellow cars of Motor Transport. Within those seven years two railway strikes had paralysed the country, and only in the north, where Lingfields and Motor Transport fought for supremacy, had transport been normal. "We don't strike," was Lingfields' motto. A length behind Motor Transport flaunted "We carry on." By the end of the second strike, the Press had taken the matter up. The Government were recommended to examine the methods of James Brockenholt and Carlo Maude. Manufacturers

from the north grinned derision at the south. The *Times* invited Brockenholt to give his views to the public. A rosy future was predicted for the British motor industries. The success of those seven years' work was guaranteed. "Brockenholt and Maude have saved the country," screamed the lesser Dailies. "The new era of motor transport has arrived." Already the Ministry of Transport was gathering experts for an inquiry. A rumour of official support and recognition intensified the fight.

The wise ones grew frantic.

"Neck or nothing. Somebody's going to bust. It'll be all over in six months' time."

And now, the final thrust, the frontal attack, simultaneously and at fever-heat, both firms launched their reserves. Came at last the appeal to the public. Presses clattered and groaned, discharging loads of pamphlets and forms: the circled "L" and the red "M.T." flared side by side on boardings; miles of space were reserved in the Dailies from Tooting to Braemar, from Pimlico to Tintagel, the pamphlets and applications forms were spread area by area, door by door. They flooded in their hundreds, till the country grocer realized capital to re-invest in one glorious gamble, and the stock-exchange clerk sold his wife's silver for a chance of a life of ease. And while James Brockenholt slept but five hours a night and was seen but little in the house in Fulham Square, Mr. Carlo Maude, his lips pursed and his eyes bright, from his bed in his flat in Jermyn Street at ten o'clock of a morning wrote to Miss Sophie Wontner in Deauville, saying

" . . . As soon as you can. We've got a clear seven months, I should say, before any decision in

the way of Government subsidies is made — those Boards of Inquiry dodder interminably — so, my Sophie, pack up your little box and come home right away. Svenk sends his love. Brock's running hard for his title. Saviour's well in with his papers. We'll try again, my pretty sweet. And this time ——"

But Isabel was busy. There were dinners to attend and dinners to give. Care was taken that no connection of Lingfields or Motor Transport met. Mrs. Proutopoli had quarrelled openly with Lady Wing. The camp was split. Talk ran on prospects: every one shared the excitement, only Isabel white and cold and remote did her duties for her husband's sake, tactfully and well, showing no sign of emotion, a creature apart, sick at heart sometimes, thinking of the better days when they two had climbed the magic sides of Barbary, wondering if still the moon shone for poor fools of lovers and if the wind still blew carelessly and free.

And down in Marlton, Mrs. Luke, a grandmother with a grandson, mother-in-law of the man of the hour, bowed her way into the formerly withheld hospitality of Lord and Lady Home.

"My daughter, yes, she is well and *so* happy."

But of these things Pob knew nothing, and while lamenting the fact of Isabel's frequent and enforced absences, comforted himself by cementing even more strongly his friendship for that freckled and sympathetic acquaintance of his, Leonard Lang-Davies.

CHAPTER II

OFTEN, at the house in Fulham Square Lang-Davies encountered Mrs. Naughton. This afternoon, making his way down King Street, he saw her majestic figure swaying along the pavement some thirty yards ahead of him. He pursued and caught her up.

"Hallo," he said, "going along for tea?"

She beamed down at him.

"Yes, I think so. She'll be tired and glad to see us."

He nodded. Isabel would be glad to see them, he knew that, but only Mrs. Naughton could have stated the fact so confidently. She was always so definite and solid. She swam through life, dignified, mountainous, like a comfortable transatlantic liner, steadfastly keeping to her course regardless of storms.

"She's a nice thing to have about the house," he'd remarked to Isabel, and she had replied:

"She's a dear. I don't know what I'd do without her!"

It gave him some little comfort to think of Mrs. Naughton being frequently with Isabel, "dropping in," being kind and considerate and wonderfully tactful. Ever since the time when he too had taken his welcome in Fulham Square for granted, he had felt that between the buxom Scotchwoman and himself existed a bond, a mutual understanding that had never found expression but was completely realized and understood. It was as if they had agreed:

"We'll help all we can. That's all — and everything." But now, he too wanted help, fearing that one day some quick bitter word of Brockenholt's would set spark to his indignation, and his long-endured anger would break forth, a sharp sword to cross-clatter that other's barbed words. And "that would never do." So this afternoon, walking through the quiet side-streets at Mrs. Naughton's side, he found himself rehearsing some opening sentence that might lead her to question him further and give him opportunity to say all those things he wanted to say, to release from captivity a five years' accumulation of hurts. And Mrs. Naughton said nothing to interrupt the thoughts that showed plain for any wise woman to see upon his freckled face. But ten minutes from the seven steps and the Doric columns he asked her suddenly:

"Is she very tired?"

"Aye," said Mrs. Naughton, "I'm sure she must be, with all this entertaining and what not. Mr. Brockenholt is making grand progress in his business, I'm told, and every one is fashed to death to know if the Government will take up Lingfields. Me husband's verra silent these days and he's always like that when things go well. But Isabel's tired, puir child. It's a strain."

"It's a damned shame," said Leonard, and on that explosion of his resentment they both looked straightly at one another, he, full of shame that at last he'd broken upon forbidden ground, she, full of pity and disapproval.

"Well, it had to come," she murmured more to herself than to him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She smiled at him.

"There's no need to be sorry," she replied. "You can't help yersel'."

"I can't," and then rather desperately: "What am I to do?"

"Do? You can't do anything!"

"It's no uncommon thing," she added. And in answer to the frightened question in his eyes: "To fall in love with another man's wife," she gave him.

He made no answer, dumb with a sudden pang of pain, greater perhaps because he knew he was understood and sympathized with.

"It's not so bad as that!" continued Mrs. Naughton. "I'm not ashamed of you. It's not in my heart to blame you, seeing the way things are. But you'll have to check yersel'! She's sad enough now, puir mite, without more to break her courage."

They walked on in silence.

"There's the child, too. You must pull up, Leonard."

"I know," he said miserably. "God knows I've tried to. But I can't bear it. You don't know how damnable it is. She's a prisoner there, and that devil's just broken her in, whipping her with words . . . whipping her. . . . You don't know."

Then Mrs. Naughton stopped and faced him squarely, very grim and large.

"I know as well as you," said she. "I'm surprised at you, Leonard. But it's not decent to talk about it. That's no way to love her, making yersel' miserable and wretched when she's wretched, too. And if you say anything to her — I'm finished with you. Not *know*, indeed!"

He stood like an abashed schoolboy before her.

"I'll try," he said.

"I know you will. It wouldn't be you if you didn't. I trust you, Leonard."

They were by the seven steps. She arranged her fur about her neck, and began to mount to the door. But at the third step, he stopped her.

"Mrs. Naughton?"

"Well?"

"I'm not — coming in, now."

"You'll not be going in when I'm gone?"

"No."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

She held out her hand. "I'll say you couldn't get away." With his hand in hers she towered above him. "You're a good lad, Leonard."

"Good-bye," he said and, snatching his hand away, turned and walked quickly down the Square. She watched him till he crossed the road and disappeared round the corner. As Waller opened the door to her, she was still nodding her head and whispering, "Dear, dear. Dear, dear — now."

"Leonard asked me to say he couldn't get away this afternoon," she told Isabel at tea.

"He's very busy?"

"Yes."

"Pob will be disappointed."

Mrs. Naughton munched her scone loudly before she spoke again.

"Mr. Brockenholt's verra busy too, I'm thinking. Me husband's like a bear, these days. We're all busy."

Isabel sighed.

"It's this big fight. Jimmy talks of nothing else. There's a title for the winner."

"Aye, but he'll get that, anyway," said Mrs. Naughton, and to herself: "If money'll buy such trash. You'll not know me then," she added.

But Isabel, rising from her chair beside the small table, disregarding Mrs. Naughton's frantic endeavours to wipe butter from the corners of her mouth and the ends of her fingers, unceremoniously put her hands against those plump, smooth cheeks and, kneeling beside her, said:

"Don't say that, Noggins. Don't say that. What should I do without you sometimes? You *do* know, Noggins, don't you, that you're a very present help in time of trouble?"

Dear, dear now! Two of them in one day. So sudden, too. Did any one ever have such difficult young things to deal with? As if it wasn't bad enough to have that young fellow breaking his heart and not coming in because he didn't trust himself, without Isabel, brave girl though she was, getting all watery and weak and having to speak, just like that boy had done, about the things that were wounding her so much. Dear, dear, what a to-do, and that Waller might be coming in, or the maid at any second . . . and those broken words and the fair, golden head now against her arm and the thin fragile shoulders shaking. . . .

"If it wasn't for you, Noggins, and Leonard, and Pob . . . I shouldn't know sometimes how to carry on — properly. . . . You see, I failed him once . . . Jimmy, I mean . . . and he never forgave me! It's all this, Noggins, money and position and a big show and — nothing else! And Pob . . . he

didn't want him, Noggins — doesn't really want him now. . . . They don't know — the others, Mrs. Proutopoli and all of them — I've never let them see . . . but I hate them! I hate them! Hate them! and their rotten ways and all the clever things they say. . . . I hate them for liking me, for the things they praise me for . . . it's all ashes, Noggins, burnt-out poor things that don't count . . . not like Pob does, and Jimmy and you and Leonard and everything that's real . . . ashes, Noggins. . . .”

“There, there,” said Mrs. Naughton, disengaging one hand to dab at her buttered lips. “There, there, dear. You mustn't make your pretty face all red and marked. That'll never do.”

And at that Isabel rose to her feet, tall and white, two bright flaming spots on either cheek, the tears still glistening there, her eyes cold and hard and “burning,” thought Mrs. Naughton afterwards, “burning you all up.”

“You're right, Noggins, it wouldn't do. Jimmy would come back and see I'd been crying, and then he'd say, ‘Had a nice day?’ and watch me when he said it, or ‘You look flushed! Been playing with young Davies and the kid?’ That's what he'd say and then go and shut himself in his study for the rest of the evening with a sneer and his papers and accounts. You're right, Noggins, it wouldn't do.”

Better the tears, unusual though they were, than these bitter true sentences. A good cry, yes, it did good that, but not this, so frank and passionate and — wounding! Poor lassie, there now, there now. . . .

And as suddenly Isabel, herself again, a smile on her lips, brave though they still trembled, shy, sweet Isabel:

"I'm sorry, Noggins. Poor dear, what you have to put up with, don't you? It's not as tragic as all that. I've got Pob."

A tap at the door. Dear, dear, that Waller! Nasty creature, always on Mr. Brockenholt's side. . . .

"I've got Pob, Noggins. It's everything that is!"

A tattoo of tappings on the door and a face peering round it, three feet from the door:

"Hallo," and Pob himself in the room, waddling towards them, his head cocked on one side, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his short blue knickers.

"Hallo, Noggins. Hallo, Mummy."

Mrs. Naughton screwed around in her seat.

"Well, I never!"

"They're new," said Pob, glancing down with pride. "They've got pockets! I wasn't allowed pockets before, because I scratched. I don't scratch now."

"What beautiful trousers," exclaimed Mrs. Naughton. "Pockets and all! You're growing up, Pob."

Dear, dear, how like his mother he was with that fair hair and bright clever face, sensitive and alert. He'd be a great man one day!

"They've got braces," he continued, and pulled up his jersey to confirm the statement. He was very proud of himself.

Isabel, bending over him, looking into his face:

"You're glad to see Noggins, darling?"

He smiled at her, and then with a quick glance around the room:

“Where’s Leonard?”

“He couldn’t come this afternoon, Pob; he’s busy.”

“Oh,” said Pob, and turned his back. “I got ——” he said and stopped short. There were signs of tears.

Mrs. Naughton asked:

“What have you got, Pob?” and for answer he walked behind the sofa and struggled with sorrow.

“I got ——” came a choked voice.

“Well, Pob? Don’t be silly, darling!”

“I got — a hairpin from — from Mrs. Bortle for Leonard’s shoes, and — and — Leonard’s not coming.”

“But he’ll come again, dear.”

“Soon?”

“I expect so.”

Did she? What a trying topic this was! Dear, dear now. . . .

“We’ll play animals,” suggested Mrs. Naughton.

“No.”

“Not animals, Pob?”

“No.”

“Oh, Pob!”

“Not — not unless you’re an elephant.”

And for the cause of peace, and because Leonard’s name seemed but a symbol for trouble in the house in Fulham Square, Mrs. Naughton swayed from her chair and allowed herself to be flogged by the imaginary whips of a fierce and excited driver, from the plains of Timbuctoo, near the fire-place, to the Himalaya mountains, by the grand piano.

But when she left, Isabel by the door said:

"If you see Leonard, Noggins, give him my love and say I'm sorry he couldn't come."

"And me, too," shouted Pob.

But in delivering that message a day later, Mrs. Naughton changed the noun.

But some days are evil from their first hour to their last. At seven o'clock Brockenholt arrived home, tossed his coat to Waller, and stamped up the stairs to his study. Isabel, stealing out of the nursery-annex where Pob was fast sleeping, heard the thud of the slammed door, and anxiously looked across to that small flushed cheek on its narrow pillow, to see if Brockenholt's carelessness had broken slumber. At the 'slam of the door, she saw Pob's body, a little thin ridge beneath the clothes, jerk together, and the next second he was sitting upright in his bed, blue eyes wide open and unseeing, both arms outstretched in an endeavour to thrust from him some intangible sudden horror of his imagination. She had crossed to him, and taken him in her arms before he had time to scream, and as she soothed and comforted him, a maid, appearing at the door, whispered:

"The master would like to see you please, madam."

Isabel busy, looked over her shoulders.

"In a minute. Tell him. Please ask nurse to come up as soon as she can, if she's finished her supper."

But it was five minutes before nurse arrived to take charge.

Her husband was sitting at his desk as she entered

the study. He twisted round as she closed the door softly behind her.

"Oh, *here* you are," he said.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Jim, but Pob ——"

"As usual! All right!"

"You woke him, banging your door."

"Did I indeed? And will he sleep now, or howl the house down for another hour?"

"He's asleep, thank you."

"Well, I want to talk to you!"

She sank into a chair and lay back, looking at him distantly and disinterestedly. His eyebrows were drawn together, and a little deep ridge from nostril to mouth corner warned her of trouble to come.

"Nothing to complain of, Jim?"

The flatness of her voice galled him. It was not so easy to hurt her nowadays as it had been formerly. To lash her with his tongue had become, almost unrecognized by himself, a pleasure and a pastime. Once, he had decided, it had been necessary to whip her into shape. The results had justified the method. It had grown into a habit, aggravated indeed by the apparent lack of effect on her. He forgot that a pebble in a shoe is hardly noticeable after the first five miles of discomfort. So he said:

"Yes, I have."

"I'm sorry, Jim. It's a long time since you've had to find fault."

"Is it? Well, the occasion has risen, curiously enough, again. You don't mind my speaking out?" he questioned.

"Isn't that beside the point, Jim — my mind-ing? Tell me, please."

"I don't care," he said brutally and deliberately, "for you to have this young man, Davies, around the place so much."

She started, and a painful flush spread over her face.

"But, Jim ——"

"I don't see that there's anything to argue about. At a time like this, when everything hangs in the balance, we can't afford to let anybody — talk!"

The colour ebbed, leaving her very pale. He prepared for an outbreak. He wanted it. It would give him opportunity to drive his request home. But instead, she answered calmly and was as cool as he was, though almost unrecognizably white.

"I understand, Jim. You don't want Leonard to come and see me any more?"

"You have remarkable insight. That is precisely what I mean."

"Is that all?"

"No." He frowned at her. "There's Mrs. Naughton. You must please remember that she's merely the wife of my manager. Need I say more?"

"Can I see her sometimes?"

"Of course. But not quite so frequently."

"Thank you."

He struggled to keep his temper. He'd every right to say what he had said, hadn't he? She was his wife and, by God, she should remember it. As for that cub, with his books and writings and rest of it. . . . What did she mean by that "thank you"? Somebody'd been putting ideas into her head, he supposed. The less she saw of these gos-

siping nobodies, the better for every one concerned. She sat there now, so unperturbed and collected, that, damn it, it looked as if she didn't care.

He stood up.

"You understand what I say?"

"Yes, Jim," — wearily, still in that flat empty voice. "Yes, I can quite understand."

He'd let fly in a minute if no tears came. He was absolutely in the right. This indifference to his wishes must show what a confounded little *she* cared for his affairs, Lingfields, his future, so promising, so full of glory to be. But before he could speak again, she too was standing, before him, her face level with his chin, her arms straight down by her sides. She said:

"I understand, Jim, and I am sorry. I ask you to believe that. As for Leonard, I don't think you quite understand what you have implied. We've been married eight years now, Jim dear, and all that time I've been trying to show you I loved you. Dear, you haven't given me much chance, if you can say things like — that! I'm still trying hard, Jim, because I know how much you want this promise of success to be fulfilled. But, dear, more than that, I'm pleased to do as you want, because, Jim, I love you still."

She looked past him, seeing through the study window the serene glory of the beech-tree in the Square, and as quietly and clearly she continued:

"Only, Jim, sometimes, one thing frightens me very much. Do you know what that is? That you'll stop me loving you. Snap me. Don't do that."

He glanced down at her anxiously, his wrath suddenly evaporated.

"You see," she was still saying, "women are like that when they love — terribly. They are long-suffering and proud in love. It's not heroic, because they are just made like that. They like giving. But, Jim, sometimes they break — not their hearts, that's little compared to what I mean — they all break up inside, and they don't love any more. They hate — terribly. They forget pain in love; they remember it in hate. One must avoid the breaking-point."

She smiled at him till he saw her as some stranger, a new creature, wrought indeed by him but of a pattern unknown, incomprehensible. Years before, when they had sat in that meadow in Sussex a few months after their marriage, he had experienced this side of her, when she had asked him:

"Why did you marry me?"

One other remark came back to him:

"Oh, my dear, one wants children, doesn't one?"

Now, as then, he was at a loss. In some way she was remote and unfathomable. Wise, less selfish, he might have understood at either of these supreme moments that he was faced with no obscure problem but that of accepting her love as she would wish to give it: seeing, indeed, that in her own way she was calling for that Black Brockenholt of Marlton who had wooed her, trying to penetrate to that personality of his who had walked the forest paths a certain afternoon when Sophie and Carlo had fled from boredom in the car, and who, finding initials carved upon a desk, had cried inwardly, "I wish I

could go back. I wish I could have another chance." Now as then she sought to find that side of him; now as then the beast that Miss Wontner knew so well, stood between them, still far-off from death, the beast that had haunted her dreams when Pob was born, the barrier and the dark cloud.

And, unwilling to deny that possessor, to say to her simply, "I too understand; I will tell you. Let us try again, both of us, together this time," pride — "a dangerous thing," Lang-Davies had said to himself the night of Mrs. Proutopoli's dinner — pride mocked him, so he hesitated. And irresolute, fumbling for words, he saw her smile gently, pat his sleeve and turn and go from the room. And the closing of that door for the third time was the closing of his heart to hers. For, settling down at his desk again till dinner, he said:

"Oh, hell! *Women!*"

CHAPTER III

THERE was nothing cheap about Carlo Maude's flat in Jermyn Street. It was, by reason of its position on the first floor, of its extra room wedged in, the most expensive in the block. Carlo himself would explain: "My hut's all right as far as it goes. But small, of course; but then, I'm a bachelor only splashed here and there with matrimony. Four rooms and the usual offices ought to do a fellow when he's nine months out of the year on his own. Like the Queen of Spain, eh?"

Now at seven o'clock, while two miles away Isabel Brockenholt closed the study door of the house in Fulham Square, he was occupied in arranging four glasses and divers bottles on a dumb waiter in his dining room. Beside the Angostura bottle he placed a box of cigars and a gold cigarette box. Matches in a silver cover completed the array. He wheeled the collection through the dividing curtains into the main room and started towards the small kitchen at the back in search of a lemon and two oranges. His man was out, as invariably happened when Carlo had "business" of some sort or another on hand. As he returned, the bell rang violently. He opened the door with a free forefinger and, fruit in hand, smiled greeting to Miss Sophie Wontner, Mr. Horace Stanhope Svenk and Mr. Save Savour.

"Come in," he said, "and sit about the place. You know the way, Sophie. Lead 'em in."

They filed in, Mr. Savour throwing his black

felt hat on a chair, and Svenk allowing his Stetson to remain upon his head.

"My, but it's hot outside, Carlo. I could do with a drink." Carlo, chipping the lemon with a dessert-knife, said:

"That's what you're going to get. And then for a nice family talkey-talk. Give Sophie a cushion, Savour, will you? She looks as if she wants to go to sleep."

Sophie, already curled up on the Chesterfield, put the pink tip of her tongue out at him.

"So'd you, Carlo, if you'd been hopping half across Europe to call at this hovel. Darling, I hate absinthe in Martinis, and don't be obstinate. Give me a smoke, somebody."

Said Carlo, shaking the mixture vigorously:

"I'm glad you've come, Sophie. We've got to get busy." He filled the glasses skilfully. "One for you, and one for you, and share the bag between you."

"Now, then. Good luck, chaps."

They sipped in silence.

"Do you mind taking your hat off, Mr. Svenk," from Sophie, her eyes half-closed; "it's such a filthy shape. Thanks so much. Well, Carlo?"

Maude glanced round.

"Better begin at the beginning, eh?"

"Surely."

"It's like this, Sophie, mia, you've been out of the country so long since the bust at the Essex Galleries — by the by, you oughtn't to have let that happen, it would have paid in the end — that you've probably not heard about Lingfields and us, eh?"

"Of course I have," said Sophie. "Don't I read the papers?"

"Well, that being so, just let me state the position. Just follow, Svenk! In six months' time the Government, bless them, are going to decide whether Lingfields or Motor Transport shall be recognized officially. They can't subsidize two shows and they're going to make a choice. At the present moment half a dozen beavers are probably sitting, hatching out our future. It's difficult to judge exactly where we stand but I guess it's not far off a dead-heat. Five years ago, my pretty sweeting, you and I agreed to lead little Jimmy Brockenholt astray——"

"If you're going to raise that," said Sophie, "I'm off."

"I've got to. Let's put it like this. It didn't come to much."

"It wasn't my fault. He quitted at the last moment."

"I know. We needn't go into that. But here's the point, ain't it, Svenk? Brock and I have had a good deal of publicity one way and another, and the country's taken the motor business to heart. I know Brock's been running the Proutopoli crowd pretty hard for a title. That 'ud be a certainty, anyway, now, for the winner, eh? We're keeping pace with Lingfields, Sophie, and we're just as good, but we've never had Brock's pull with the crowd. But, me dear, the Government are going to take up the show that's got the most capital. 'Cos why? They hate putting their hands in the pockets. They've only just scraped through with this Building Scheme. Moreover, capital means popularity,

and they'll drive hard for that. The country's got to be pleased. But the country's going to back something—it's certain of. They're swinging, now. We want a row, Sophie. It doesn't matter how big or how little, we want something. A little nasty noise that's going to make the Honours Committee think twice about recommending Brock's name on their List. Seen the *Evening Herald*? Yes, no? There's two columns in it. Guff, but good guff. That's Saviour. He's well in. Eh?"

Mr. Saviour nodded.

"They're keen on the stuff. It's good and newsy. They fall over one another for latest developments. You wouldn't believe how this stunt's taken. It's sound, too."

"Certainly it is," agreed Svenk. He nibbled his shred of lemon-peel. "I can tell you, Miss Sophie, that in a long business career, I don't think I've ever had so good a thrill as this one is. I'm real excited. It's sound, too, as Carlo here says. The transport business on a large scale has got to come. We're going to beat those bone-heads with the circled 'L.' We've got to. We can't afford to lose, and that's honest."

"And they can't afford to lose, either," said Carlo. "And that's why, Sophie, we want you to have another shot. It's a little side-line that may make a difference in the end. I don't say Brock'll fall for it. That's up to you. He's not on good terms with his wife. We all know what he is: damned headstrong and wilful, and can't bear to be beat. Any ideas, eh?"

"We understand each other, Carlo?" asked Miss Wontner.

"That's agreed. You've got my word. I'll settle up with you, Sophie. If we're in, you can have what you want. I've told you so."

For some few seconds Miss Wontner appeared to be fast asleep, the cigarette smoke still curling out of her nostrils, and tight little mouth pressed together, one white slender arm behind her head. Then she spoke:

"Do you really think this idea of yours is going to work, Carlo?"

He clicked his tongue.

"Can't say. It's worth trying. Under ordinary circumstances, no. But this fight's at fever-heat, my dear. A touch might do it."

"It's worth it," said Svenk.

Said Sophie: "All right," slipped off the couch, and prepared to leave. "It'll be too damn funny for words. No, I won't want another, thanks. Anybody coming?"

She left with Mr. Savour.

After three minutes' deliberation Svenk asked:

"What's the history?"

Carlo grimaced.

"Same old tale. Threw her over to get married."

"Well, there's nothing in that."

"There's the hell of a lot," said Carlo. "See, I'll make another! A hell of a lot, Svenk. She liked him."

"She *did*?" exclaimed Svenk.

"She thought she didn't, but she did. She found out, too. You know, Svenk, there's the devil of a lot of good in that girl, somewhere. That's her trouble. They're a queer crowd, that sort. Born

promiscuous and with a cash-complex, tough as nails, till you find their soft spot."

"And he's that?"

"I always think so. It's her own fault, of course. She asks for trouble. Always has. She just does what she wants to and lets the rest go hang. She's plucky too."

"That so?"

"Yes. Plucky and transparent. She hates our friend."

"You mean she'd like to do the other thing."

"Be keen on him? Well, what's the difference? You dining anywhere?"

"Yes," said Svenk, "with you."

But two days later, Carlo Maude received a letter from Miss Wontner.

. . . "At the Imperial. He was eating there alone. It's a beastly place, opposite his offices. I found out that he lunched there usually and waited. All things come to good girls who wait, don't they, Carlo? There's a sort of lounge place, so I sat there, feeling beastly hungry, and with a taste in my mouth like the bottom of the parrot's cage. (Your young friend Saviour gets drunk too quickly.) Nevertheless, having put on my best beggar's costume, I sat and twiddled my thumbs, all worked-up like. Well, he came out, fully gluttoned after half an hour. I'd taken a seat near the door, so he couldn't fail to notice me. I'd distinguished myself as a competent city typist, by the way. You know, nice shiny elbows and a bashed hat. He spotted me right off, and pretended he didn't see me, but the hat did it, Carlo. My dear, it had taken me all the

morning to bash. It was just too awful. When he saw the hat he said 'Christ!' under his breath. I looked up at him then, and did the modest maiden (I'm good at that. It always works with them under twenty-five!), and made to get out. He followed me. Last time, you see, I'd had Paquin on; Pimlico hit him hard. I fled. He followed. At the island in the street he caught me. What d'you think he said? Just this:

" 'What in hell, Sophie, is that on your head?'

" 'I was awfully pleased. It was too priceless.

" 'It's a hat,' I said.

" 'I'll swear he groaned. We got talking then, real heart-stuff, darling. I told him my history, standing there on that blasted island with the buses whizzing by. 'I'm broke,' said I. 'What?' says he. 'Bloomin' well broke,' says I. I think he thought I was on the streets! He took it properly. He was hurt.

" 'Down and out, Sophie?'

" 'Down and out,' says I.

" 'He was awfully upset. You see, five years ago he'd bought a flat for me. He always hated to see what he called 'pretty women up the spout.' I looked it, then, all right. I think he felt a bit mean: I meant him to. And the consequences were? He said that he couldn't stick seeing me 'down,' and that, for the sake of old times, O ye Gods! he'd give a hand. Purely platonic, of course. I gave him an address in Bloomsbury, and he's going to get in touch with me and 'put me on my legs again.' So that's that, Carlo darling, isn't it? He's just the same. Full of himself and very important. God, it's funny when you look back, isn't

it? He's a mess, I do think. Never was good enough to be good, or bad enough to be bad. It'll be an awful job changing when he calls. I'll bet he does call. I find it fearfully hard to become really decently dowdy. I'll report progress. Anyway, the first step's made. He likes decorating women and he's got a good chance now. You can take me out to lunch tomorrow, if you like. Tell Svenk (have I spelt him right?) that his hat's too filthy for words. Also tell young Saviour that two lunches isn't my price for a squeeze in a taxi that's got no springs in the back seat. These kids down from Oxford don't seem to have any sense in their heads nowadays. Tell him, Sophie keeps Sophie to herself, will you? He's a nice thing though, if only he wouldn't use Honey-and-Flowers hair-oil.

"I've got to bash a hat now in case I meet Jimmy again, and practise looking shoddy and reformed and virginal in a mirror. It's a scream. By the by, when we lunch tomorrow, you can take me to Seldon's afterwards. There's a hat, there. . . ."

Carlo Maude was very pleased. He rang up Horace Stanhope Svenk.

"She hates your hat," he told him; "but, my God, I do believe she's put it across."

Svenk was hurt.

"Hell! but these hard hats can't be worn."

"No?" asked Carlo. "But I guess they can be taken off."

"I was liking that lil' girl," said Svenk.

"Common failing," said Carlo, and rang off.

CHAPTER IV

Now indeed was the house in Fulham Square a prison. There seemed but one inhabitant there, free of care, unfettered by the atmosphere of things to be done, yet even Pob discerned that good friends lost make sad hours. Leonard came no more. There were no shoes to be picked, no tumbling tunes between tea and bedtime. How, in truth, could Leonard come, since Isabel's letter to him?

"I find this terribly difficult to say," she had written, "but as the fact is to be faced it seems best to get it over and done with at once . . . so you see, Leonard, it's much better if you don't call very frequently. Jim is all agog with his business affairs, and it would be a poor reward to him, after all he's done for me, to worry him at such a time, when he's full of anxiety. I know you will help me out . . ."

Lang-Davies, wrathful and agonized, had demanded of Mrs. Naughton:

"You *told* her?"

"I, Leonard, told her?" indignantly. "Bless the boy, it's a great fool you must think me. I've had a note too."

He read it.

"So we're both forbidden the house?"

"It's none of her doing, *puir mite*. It's that great husband of hers, all worked-up and proud and headstrong."

"Murder's too good," said Lang-Davies.

But Isabel's time was fully occupied. Lisette was in constant demand.

"Lisette! Lisette! has the frock arrived? Well, quick then. Yes, the pearls. He'll want me to wear those."

The calendar on her *escritoire* in the *boudoir* was crossed and re-crossed with engagements. "Meet Jimmy for lunch 1.30. The Albemarle, to meet Sir Carr Borton." "Dine alone with Proutopoli. J out." "Sir Carr and Lady C., two others. Dinner here." There was little time left to worry over deeper things. These affairs must "go with a bang." Lingfields demanded it, Lingfields would win by them, by this gathering in of "influence," "right people," and "good big money." The days were a scramble from place to place, a short time for dressing, swift journeys in the car, shakings of hands, new faces, old faces, chatter, chatter, interminable, inexhaustible, and with always the same anxious topic — "Lingfields." Instructions jerked out by Jimmy. "Now, Sir Carr Borton! He's behind the *Globe*. Do anything you like, but keep in with them. Lady Carr's a cat? Doesn't matter." "Don't forget to ring up and ask Mrs. Proutopoli to bring that list of addresses." Jimmy thundering into the house, storming out of it. "For God's sake, hurry," and occasional scraps of information from him during a meal interrupted by the telephone ringing. "We're winning all down the line. We've got the pull over Motor Transport. The public's responding."

"What does that mean exactly, Jim?" she'd asked.

"Mean? They're slamming their money into us, that's what it means. Backing us!"

"And all because you've issued shares — those application forms you sent out."

"Well," — snorting — "how else can they put their money with us unless they were asked."

"They write in, do they?"

"Yes, yes! Leave the business side alone, you'll never understand it. Is everything all ready for Monday?"

But if Lingfields took first place in their thoughts, nevertheless a secondary anxiety cropped up now and again in the mind of each. In moments snatched from the welter of business, Brockenholt considered, vaguely disturbed, the reappearance of Sophie Wontner "down and out." Poor little Sophie! Damn shame, it was. Something ought to be done for her. What was Carlo thinking about to let her get as low as she must be? If it wasn't for the business, he'd go and see Carlo and make him do something. After all, she wasn't his concern now, though five years back he might have committed himself. In a way he was sorry he'd let a whim close that reopening of the old intercourse. Sophie wouldn't have been so badly off now, if he'd had anything to do with it. Moreover, came regrets. They'd been good times, those in the old days, that time at Capri when first he'd caught sight of that flaming hair and peaky determined little face. She was wild too and exciting. None of this frigid remoteness like his wife had. But that was as it should be. He remembered a

quotation out of somebody's book, a jolly book by a chap who was pretty famous, wasn't he? "Temperament, the best thing in a mistress, the worst thing in a wife." That was true. It worked. But to think of Sophie, plucky little witch Sophie, "down and out!" Pretty bad, pretty rotten! When he'd time he'd see what could be done. Lord, but how things came back. That night down at Marlton when he'd said good-bye to her: "It's too damn funny for words. We understand one another, and that's all there is to be said!" She'd taken it well, hadn't she? Just saying "good night" and walking into the porch without another word, knowing "good night" meant "good bye." Perhaps he hadn't behaved very well! But what else could he have done? He'd been upset and filled with conflicting emotions. Anyway, it had had to be. "We understand one another." How vilely badly most people managed their affairs, blundering along, without a thought as to their ultimate direction. And now she was "down and out." . . .

And while Brockenholt found seconds to give Miss Wontner's plight consideration, Isabel worried because Pob had lost something of his usual vivacity and sometimes would be found sitting disconsolate and queerly still on the boxes in the room next to Mrs. Bortle's. At these times his lips were pressed together and a treacherous spot of colour glowed in either cheek. Once he was cruelly sick in the middle of the night, clutching at Isabel (who had jumped from bed, at nurse's urgent tapping), with hot bent little fingers and the perspiration starting from his forehead, making even his hair damp and "rat-tailed." He was always terrified of sickness,

but when the attack passed he lay back in his cot, smiling up at her, as Isabel washed his lips, and telling her emphatically that he was quite, quite right now, and there wasn't any pain left; there really hadn't been very much, anyway, just a sort of gulpiness deep down and there you were. Isabel tired and shocked out of her scanty rest, had taken courage to knock at her husband's door, and at two o'clock in the morning question him as to the advisability of seeing a doctor. He, too, was tired and, complaining bitterly, asked what the devil was the matter?

"Jim, dear, Pob's been dreadfully ill! What am I to do?"

"Do? What's the matter with him? This is pretty sickening, Isabel, at this time of night."

She'd looked very frail and piteous, shivering in her nightdress and flimsy kimono, facing his temper at this low hour, chilled and weary, but forcing him to recognize his responsibility, never before towards herself, but now most emphatically towards his son.

"All right, I'll come and see."

They had returned to Pob, and Brockenholt had questioned him. What was the trouble? Tummy? Better now? Been eating — what?

"Nuts, Daddy."

And he felt all right?

"Yes, thank you."

Perhaps some instinct, strong in sensitive children, told him that this temporary sickness of his would bring trouble to his mother for rousing his father from sleep. The idea came naturally to him, who had heard at times this same dark man say unintelli-

gible, but from the tone of his deep voice, dreadful things to the angel-person who now sat so white and anxious at the foot of his bed. Somehow he realized that this beloved creature and his thunderous father thought differently about him. He didn't want to be a "nuisance." He'd been called that before. It meant loud voices and stampings and splutterings, that were really rather funny, if it wasn't for the fact that his mother looked so ghostly and cold afterwards! At any price such a re-occurrence must be stopped. It was Mummy who really mattered!

"And you ate a lot of nuts?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Only two really, but then they'd think it was his fault and that was as it should be. Perhaps it was his fault. Nurse had said nuts were indigestible.

"Well, good night, Pob, and go to sleep."

And outside the door Brockenholt had said:

"If you let him bloat himself on things like that, of course the kid'll get indigestion. What d'you expect? He's all right now."

"You're sure, Jim?"

"My dear woman," he replied, "you'll make *yourself* ill if you aren't careful. Kids always upset themselves. They're like beetles! Gorge till they burst!"

"Really, Jim? I'm worried. Had he better have a doctor?"

"Twenty, if you want, but I'm not staying up all night, neither are you. We'll be up nearly all tomorrow night at Sir Carr's. Get away to bed, or you'll look like a dish-clout in the morning. He's all right."

"Truly, Jim?"

"Good God, yes. I should have thought you'd have understood children better. Now go to — bed!"

In the morning Pob, if a little ashamed of his lapse, was very well.

Brockenholt, looking in at the nursery before he left for the office, declared that he was "right as rain." He told Isabel as much.

"I'd better get the doctor, I think, Jim."

"There's no hurry, my dear girl; besides, what time today will you have to hang about? I do wish you wouldn't worry. You'll be getting fitted all this morning; you lunch out, and this afternoon the Nevilles are coming. And tonight there's the Carr Bortons. It's not so urgent as all that. Besides, so much depends on Sir Carr, and I can't have you arriving with a face like a fiddle."

It was true; there would be little time today and Jim was very definite. Moreover, having disturbed him during the night, to continue argument would only rouse him to fury. That would be fatal when they must both appear in public. It meant incessant irritable nagging all the way in the car that put her off her balance and destroyed her self-confidence, gained only even now by dint of severe self-discipline. Nevertheless, she telephoned Doctor Mortimer.

"Is it urgent?" he asked, the other end of the line.

She explained. Her husband didn't think so, but perhaps it would be just as well, wouldn't it? Doctor Mortimer, in his own way, a wise fellow with fees as brilliant as his bedside-manner, knowing too, after many years of experience, what mothers of only children were like, chuckled to himself and replied:

"Well then, that'll be all right, Mrs. Brockenholt. I gather it's nothing much. But I'm busy. We're in for flu again. Tubes and dust and theatres. I'll be round some time this evening. You're out? No matter. You can always ring up, of course. *Good-bye.*"

And all the morning Isabel honoured her dress-makers, scrambled off to lunch, and in the afternoon did her duty by the Nevilles.

But at four o'clock Brockenholt left his office, nor did he make his way back to the house in Fulham Square. Instead, he travelled westwards to the dingier, once lovelier, mazes of Bloomsbury. At the top of a long street he alighted and made his way along the pavement searching for the given number. No traffic invaded the street; on either side the square-faced, mellow-bricked houses slumbered; doors, blistered by summer, topped by cracked fanlights, were carelessly half open or deliberately tight shut; windows were sly and suspicious with yellow blinds half-down or lace curtains pulled across. A seemingly drowsy street, yet watching with half-closed eyes; a concealed and secretive street. At night a kind of life would fill the house and pace the pavements. People would walk swiftly and with echoing heels, voices low and surprisingly indistinct would mutter from corners, there would be a nocturnal private business here, with gently closing doors and blinds, blank now, then broadly lit, and with figures silhouetted on them from the inside of bright gas-illuminated rooms. A street then, filled with a traffic but of no rumbling wheels or raucous motor horns.

At a number on the left-hand side he stopped

and pulled the knob beside the door. Beneath, in a basement, wires wheezed, a bell jangled, slackened, and tinkled into silence. He rang again, and footsteps slapped along a passage, the lock clicked. A dignified lady with grey hair, a grim chin and a black alpaca dress regarded him stonily. A faint smell of fustiness, a little sour, reminiscent of the breath of a public-house hung round the dark and narrow hall. There was an atmosphere of aggression about the dignified lady. Brockenholt glared at her. He noticed immediately and resented her large black shoe thrust instinctively against the bottom of the scarcely opened door.

"I wish to see Miss Sophie Wontner," he said. "I understand she lives here."

"Do you know her?"

The old ugly sneer slipped across his face. He looked at the landlady deliberately and insolently.

"You surprise me," he said at length, and caught the side of the door before she had time to press against it.

"I've never realized what tact one must require to conduct a boarding house in this delightful neighbourhood. I do, curiously enough, know Miss Wontner."

"She's not in."

"No? Then I'll wait."

The lady hesitated.

"I don't know . . ." she murmured.

He grinned at her.

"Naturally," he agreed, "you wouldn't. I can assure you Miss Wontner will be extremely annoyed if you turn me away."

"All right," she said. "Come in."

As he stepped by her she glanced shrewdly at him and jerked her head upwards.

"Upstairs."

"Do you mind showing me? Thank you."

They mounted the stairs. Linoleum covered the floor of the hall, the walls were drab and mottled, the banisters curved steeply, twisting high about the well of the house.

"She *is* out," said the landlady, "but'll be back soon, she said." A chilly smile flittered across her lips. "She's only been here a week. You have to be careful. We're *respectable*."

"Quite. I understand." He smiled at her.

She thawed.

"In here." She turned a door handle. "Not long, I shouldn't say. Cup of tea?"

"I'll wait, thanks."

She left him.

The room was roughly fifteen feet square. A window, with a net curtain on a white rod, looked out on to a jungle of chimneys. A blackened weather-vane swung two yards from the pane from the top of a cowed tin vent pipe. A dressing-table with a spotted mirror stood on one side, a chest of drawers, light brown decked with oak-markings, on the other. A folding bed, with two petticoats and a chemise tossed on it, was on his right. Over the iron and bulging fire-place, the mantelpiece was burdened with cheap china figures, thin glass vases, and trinket boxes with circular coloured representations of Margate, Broadstairs, and the pier at Hastings. Miss Wontner had chosen her setting with care and with something like a touch of genius. Brockenholt felt sick. My God! what a place!

Clean, yes certainly, but the paper fans, the oil-paper — with flamingoes feeding — over the washing-stand, the carpet with its fibre skeleton showing through, what a hole, what a filthy hole! He sat down heavily in a rocking chair by the window, deeply perturbed, wondering if in any way responsibility of *his* had brought Sophie to — this! There must be hundreds, scores of hundreds of similar rooms all along this street. And that gorgon in the black dress had been emphatic — “We’re respectable.” Doubtless! But heavens, what of those other rooms? What a beastly thought, how utterly beastly! Sophie near all this! Rubbing elbows with it. Sophie, who was so fastidious, so wonderfully dainty and with such a passionate love for “things.” Something would have to be done. . . .

A whispering was going on down below, foot-steps again, light this time, tip-tip-tap, a little snapped-off laugh, that thrust at him like a lance, sharp at his heart, a laugh he knew so painfully well, of Capri, of other days, of nights . . . and she was in the doorway!

“Well, of all the people!”

He stumbled to his feet; towering over her, dark with trouble, hesitant.

“I thought I’d better come and — see.”

She slammed the door, plucked off her hat, and sent it skimming on to the bed, her hair flaming, tumbling over her head. She pushed it back with her two hands devoid, he noticed, of rings. She blew her cheeks out, “Lord, I’m hot.”

He didn’t know what to say.

“Jolly place, Jim?”

He turned his back and stared out of the window.

"My hat!" he said. "Oh, my hat!"

She surveyed his back with vicious eyes that smiled at him the moment he turned. She had him, now. Ah! that look of his! Cheated, she'd been before. Cheated! It couldn't touch her now. . . .

"Oh, sit down, Jim. Sorry the sofa's away at the wash. That chair'll bear you."

She crossed to the mirror.

"Don't mind if I ablute?" She applied powder vigorously. "As a matter of fact, it isn't so bad," she addressed his reflection; "the old girl's a decent sort, when you know her. Better than the last."

"The last, Sophie?"

"Um. She swore beautifully. I've learnt a lot about women lately, Jim. They get a tang to their oaths that men never get. I don't ——"

"Sophie!"

"Yes?"

"What's happened?"

She sat on the bed, her legs tucked beneath her.

"Life history of Sophie Wontner, one time queen o' Babylon."

"Be serious, Sophie."

"Serious?" she laughed. "That's too damn funny for words." The smile disappeared. "*Serious!* Jim, my dear, you don't know the meaning of that word! It means something you don't dare do! It means thinking — going back, and thinking again. Till ——"

"My dear!" He bit his lip. "Don't let's ——"

"I'll tell you. After ——"

"Yes. Skip that!"

"Well, I ran a show at the Essex Galleries. It bust. Drinking after hours. How sweet is liberty.

I bust, too. Money's everything, Jim, to me. There wasn't any. I got into a touring company in a revue and danced. I broke a toe one night, with a shoe that had slipped its padding. After that — well, it's an easy run down. I'm looking for a job, now."

"Wasn't there anybody — to — to help?"

"No."

"Oh, God, I'm sorry, Sophie; I'm so damn sorry." The rocking chair dipped and rose.

He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"I must go. See here ——"

"Well?"

"I'll do what I can, Sophie, I'll see if I can get you into anything; meanwhile ——"

"Yes!"

"Get out of here. Take rooms. I'll see to it."

"Thank you, Jim."

He groped for his hat and gloves.

"Let me know. Only be — tactful!"

"My dear. Of course."

"Good-bye."

"Au revoir, Jim."

"And, Jim. Oh, thank you."

"There, there ——" he said, and swung out of the room.

She waited until she heard the door bang below, echoing up the well. Then she called over the banisters:

"Hi!"

The dignified lady appeared from beneath the stairs.

"Get me a taxi, will you, Mrs. Nice-person? No, wait, in five minutes' time! You're a dear!"

So that was that! Too damn funny. Carlo would jump for joy. She busied herself at the glass, straightened the bed, patted the cushions smooth in the rocking chair. They were still warm from the pressure of his back. Her fingers lingered there, warm against that other warmth, touching where he had touched, tips of tiny fingers remarkably like a caress. Suddenly she snatched the cushion and flung it against the wall. You'd got to be hard. . . .

"Damn you!" she said. "Oh, damn, and damn you! I do hate you!"

And with that she too fled from that mean room in that mean house, calling out in the hall:

"Mrs. Thingummy! My taxi? Oh, there you are! Thank you ever so. And my bill? No! there's not any luggage, only a petticoat and an undie on the bed. I don't want 'em. Bye-bye."

In Mr. Carlo Maude's flat that evening was a great rejoicing.

"*Brains!*" cried Horace Stanhope Svenk. "My! Brains and then some!"

CHAPTER V

AT seven o'clock Isabel was arrayed by Lisette; at eight she dined with her husband; at nine o'clock she crept upstairs to bid a short good-bye to Pob asleep. The room was lit only by the night-light on a table in the centre; its daffodil glow rose flowering to the ceiling, a ray, leaking through a crack in the carton, darted through the dusk to burnish the soft golden crop of hair on his pillow. His face was in shadow, and he slept, quietly and easily, on his back, an arm uncovered lying outside on the quilt, his fingers as yet twisted round a feather half-pulled out of the material, with which he'd play himself to sleep. Nurse was downstairs mending small trousers against his awakening. Isabel stood by the cot wondering if she would wake him if she turned him on his side and covered the bare arm. As she bent down, she saw that his blue eyes were open in the shadow, regarding her steadily.

"You ought to be asleep, Pob!"

"I was," he said. "I was, Mummy; I've only just woked up. Hallo, Mummy."

He smiled with pleasure at her white and shimmering dress and put out a hand and touched the brocade.

"Are you going out, Mummy?"

"Yes, darling."

"Not for long?"

"No, Pob, not for long. Back quite soon," and

then, because the question seemed to call for a question from her, she asked:

"Why?"

He considered before he replied:

"I thought you were going out," he answered strangely, "and I hoped you wouldn't go for as long as I thought you might be."

"Long, Pob?"

"Oh, yes! Weeks and months and years! You won't really, though," he added to convince himself as much as her. "Not *really*."

"We'd never leave one another, Pob," said Isabel. "Never."

He stroked her cheek with a finger.

"I've had a lovely dream, Mummy. It's all sort of going on now. Bells and talkings all near and nice. Awfully funny."

"Go to sleep now, Pob. Back soon."

Clinging to her, rubbing his nose and chin against the softness of her neck.

"Back soon. Good night, Mummy; good night, darlingest poor young thing."

"Good night."

"Good night."

Downstairs she said to her husband:

"I don't want awfully to leave Pob."

"Well, Mortimer'll come soon now."

"Yes, he ought to."

But she telephoned the doctor before they left. Yes, quite in order. His secretary speaking. Busy? Yes, this epidemic. The nurse would know. Yes, about half-after nine. Thank you.

At quarter-past nine she sat by the side of Brock-

enholt, whirling through the streets to Knightsbridge. Her husband was pleased with her, in a good mood. She looked radiant. At nine-thirty she was humouring Sir Carr Borton, amused despite herself at the old man's old-fashioned flirtatious platitudes, for once pleased with herself, very lovely, very splendid. At ten to ten came a telephone message that brought her white as death itself, trembling and aghast, to her husband, snatching at his sleeve, stammering her terror out to him, regardless of the group around him, of Lady Carr Borton, of Mrs. Proutopoli, of him, of herself, of everything except the terrible thing she had been told.

By ten o'clock the car was smoking back through Knightsbridge, slewing round corners, grinding and careering.

Seven minutes later she was struggling with Waller and a uniformed nurse outside the nursery door, through whose chinks a sweet, cloying smell of chloroform and ether floated, behind which, under the glare of the electric bulb, stripped of its shade, two men in white smocks, the perspiration dripping from their foreheads, leaned over a cot with its railings down, worked with flying, darting fingers. . . .

"Oh, my God, let me in. Waller, Waller, let me in!"

And then Brockenholt, hands on her waist, drew her away, down to the drawing room, where she sat very still, without speaking, not seeming to hear the torrent of words of his vain comfortings, nor Lisette's broken staccato sentences or Mrs. Bortle's thudding feet, nor seeming to taste the brandy her husband poured out for her; only sitting there utterly still, straining to catch, through all those

subdued sounds, the beat of the calamitous wings of that dark angel who now too waited in the house in Fulham Square.

And most assuredly did she hear their dreadful murmur, as they brushed against the walls of that bright nursery, trailed through corridor, down the stairs, past the door, and by the seven steps beneath the Doric portico swept high to swing their burden clear of earth. For when Doctor Mortimer called Brockenholt outside and said:

“Quite hopeless! I *understood* the case was not urgent. All the difference — absolutely. You must please realize everything that was possible, humanly possible, my dear Mr. Brockenholt, was done. That nurse of yours! Rubbing the child’s stomach because he had a pain. Simply expediting the bursting of the abscess. Appendicitis that developed, amazingly rapid it is in children, into peritonitis. Anybody with any sense near at the time would probably have saved the boy.”

And as Brockenholt whispered, stricken suddenly:

“He, by now — he ——”

“By now, yes. Under the anæsthetic.”

Isabel, rising steadily from her seat in the drawing room, with no questioning, disregarding her husband, speaking only to Doctor Mortimer, asked quietly:

“I may go up, now, please, Doctor Mortimer?” and walked up the stairs to the nursery, turned the door-knob firmly, and requested the nurse and anæsthetist to retire.

She stayed in the room for several minutes, and then, turning out the light, descended the stairs, tearless and steady, to where that anxious group awaited her.

Brockenholt, ready with a supporting arm, started towards her. She stopped on the bottom step but one, and said to him:

"I can manage quite well, thank you, Jim," and reached the floor alone.

In her hand she held three pairs of small shoes tied together by their laces. They watched her enter the drawing room and close the door. There was a long silence.

"Go in," whispered Mortimer. "Don't leave her alone. I'll wait a bit in case ——"

And when Brockenholt went in, he saw her bending over the fire, dropping one by one those same small shoes into the red and crimson flames. She answered his unspoken question without turning round.

"His shoes. He loved shoes. I could not think of them just being given away like his toys or anything else. He loved shoes. There's no harm in my doing this, is there, Jim?"

"No harm in that," he said stupidly, and then, in his agony, "Oh, Isabel, *Isabel!*"

She pushed him away gently, looking him full in the eyes with so gentle and remote a regard that he felt the tears burning his lids as they had not done since that day in Marlton when he had discovered what her love might do for him. But let him touch her, she would not, and he waited there till the clock chimed the turn of the night and a handful of ashes and two molten buckles rested upon the embers, when she said: "I must go to bed," and left him.

And at no time from the hours of seven to twelve had she cried.

CHAPTER VI

THERE must be death in sorrow, a power to kill. Sad sudden things arising, gusts of death quick as wind, as the wind quickly gone must bring with them death's narcotic. From this is no escape, else how should life, but in a little way only, be merciful? Nor who shall say what a death must this thing give, of heart, of physical being, or of mind? Are not, too, a string of little sorrows but one girdle of pain, and a greater pain but a clasp and a fast lock added? These things must be, and Brockenholt, dismayed, watching his wife, Isabel, searched within her half-concealed depths for some sign that should show in what manner Robin's death had brought a death of something within herself to her. And watched in vain. Sometimes she spoke of the boy, more frequently now after his funeral, but with no show of tears, pointing out, almost as if he still lived, a place, a chair, a corner beloved by him. His toys and much of the nursery furniture were packed up and sold or given away. She supervised these operations as if, according to Mrs. Bortle, "she was counting the washin', and not sending off all them bits of things the little fellar had owned." Day by day Brockenholt awaited the outburst that, after the first numbness, he felt certain must come: a storm of broken-heartedness that, crying loudly to Heaven, would contain in it a token of the great blame attached to him. Rather would he have

heard those cruel things being told to him bitterly hour by hour than to have her like this, so deadly calm, so distant and horribly "natural." Now completely was he at a loss. There seemed nothing he could do or say. He became afraid.

One evening, returning early though business pressed, in order to be with her in case she wanted him, and not finding her in her room or anywhere about the house, with a sudden terrible thought that at last the storm had broken and destroyed her with it, he ran from door to door, calling, "Isabel, are you there, are you there?" But at length he found her in the box-room near Mrs. Bortle's, where she stood by the window, her chin on her hands, elbows resting on the packing-case that had once been Robin's seat. She made no sign that should show she had noticed his entry, but continued staring over the chimneys opposite. He felt it was impossible to leave her alone up there, probably counting the chimney-pots and giving each the name that she and Pob had given them: names which he'd forgotten, in truth scarcely ever known; names now that formed a secret link between her and that dead child. With a tact and gentleness absent for five years from his manner towards her, he passed his hand through her arm. Her fingers were cold and as he stroked them with some idea of giving them a little warmth, a gesture of pleading, he said:

"Come down from here, Isabel. It's draughty."

She obeyed at once, but dropped her arm down by her side so that he must take free his guiding hand.

"Just as you wish, Jim."

These days always was this tone of submission in

her voice when talking to him, and that was seldom. It cut him to the quick.

“Or if you really want to stay here, Isabel, I’ll have a stove brought up?”

“I’m quite willing to come down, Jim.” On the stairs she asked: “You think my staying up there is morbid, don’t you?”

“Well ——”

“You should say so, Jim. You can always speak the plain truth to me. I am quite used to it.”

He made no answer.

In the study, sitting on a cushion before the fire, she added:

“But it’s not morbid.”

He had suffered her like this for three months, now. He was wild with the mystery and pain of it. In all places had she been brilliant and brave. She had refused to ignore her engagements and as regularly as before did her duty by him, with never a sign to any one else of the dreadful thing that had happened. Therefore people who had admired her previously worshipped her now. “What a woman, my dear Mrs. Proutopoli, what a woman! Going through all that, and still standing by him at this critical time.” “So unlike young people generally these days, dear Lady Carr Borton.” “And they were at my house ——”

Thus Brockenholt in desperation:

“Won’t you let me help you, Isabel?”

“If you like, Jim.”

How strong she was now, how unfathomable. . . .

“Don’t you think, Isabel, if you let yourself — go a little. Get it over, instead ——”

“Cry, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Cry? How strange, Jim, to think *crying* makes things easier. I can’t cry. I’ve no tears left. They’ve all been drained away, a long time ago. A long, long time. But then, how should you know that? You never saw them. I don’t think any one could count all the tears I’ve cried — you, least of all, Jim, who caused them. And you ask for more!”

“Don’t,” he said. “Is it quite fair, Isabel?”

“Fair? To make a thing fair is to give measure for measure, isn’t it? All these words. They mean so little. You must think, I suppose, that I’m behaving purposely to hurt you. If you do, you’re quite wrong. I can’t be different. All these years I’ve given to you. What more can I give when there’s nothing more *to* give? Is it worth while telling you the truth?”

“I think you’d better tell me,” he said.

“Then, Jim, I would rather take now. I have nothing left myself. You’ve taken my friends away, even the best, though the littlest of them. You’ve taken yourself away from me. And now, to make yourself feel more assured and comfortable in your mind, you want me to weep and wail. You want to come back. You’d rather see me angry and accusing you than be as I am. That’s because you’d know how to deal with me. You locked me out, now I lock you out. I told you. I warned you. You are so wise, Jim, that you could afford not to listen to me, then. It’s happened, that’s all. It’s beyond me, entirely out of my control. I simply cannot help it. I’m so strong now, so wonderfully — free.”

"So you mean ——"

"I mean, that what I warned you of has just happened."

"As much as all that, Isabel?"

"As much as that, Jim!" and rubbed her hands together gently before the fire. So for the third and last time was Brockenholt brought into direct conflict, allied with the beast in him, with Isabel: once in a Sussex meadow, once in his study before Robin's death, now again in the same place. Occasion by occasion that conflict had intensified. Now, indubitably he knew the crisis had come. Twice had he ignored her pleading, the third time the very weapons of his own fighting were arrayed against him. That afternoon in Sussex, a little attention to her wishes, a little giving of himself to her; that evening in his study, a greater giving: this evening, actual sacrifice only could atone. To take her away! That was the thing to do. To give her now the gift that so often she had asked for; to leave London and affairs, and somewhere, hidden and alone, to beg her love, to win again the shy sweet Isabel of the first years, to cast aside the garment of the beast, and, as Black Brockenholt, sing beneath her window, plead with her and plead with her. Thus only now could Robin's death and the chain of lesser hurts be washed away. And it was impossible. To leave London, to spend the necessary time with her would mean Lingfields' failure. It was impossible. In two months' time the greatest desire of his life would be his; the triumph would be completed. But by then. . . . And she had said that she was "free." Freedom! Of his own accord had he bound the ropes around him,

What, in truth's name, was Truth? What indeed was real? All things mattered so much. All things were real. But above all these, Isabel! Isabel among the flowers at the house on the Common at Marlton; Isabel rosy with love on Martinsell; Isabel, at her window calling "Good night" into the shadows around the road; Isabel loving him, who hated him now. And no words of his could tell her this: that he, too, torn by the pride and the beast in him that only Sophie understood, would give much to return, to warm his hands again at that flame. He could not tell her. She would not listen. "All these words." Deeds only now, and it was impossible. Besides his duty to her was his duty to Lingfields. Isabel or Lingfields?

Once years ago he had cried, "If only I could go back. If only I could have another chance."

"All these words," and so little done to justify that desire. Such be the prisons men build around themselves, the battlements of which are topless and ungated. But the subject had been broached and reluctant to open it again later, to sum up renewed courage, he continued:

"It's not too late, Isabel?"

Did not a wise man once say, "Now at the last gasp of love's latest breath. . . . Now if thou wouldst, when all have given him over, from death to life thou mightest yet recover!" Even now, so with these two; even with Isabel hating him now, so hating him.

Therefore she waited for his next words, knowing full well if he should sacrifice some dearest treasure for her, so might she even yet not find it in her heart to condemn.

He was saying:

"If we could go away . . . then perhaps we'd be able to put all this to rights, mightn't we? . . ."

Now — now would he do this thing, or was still his mind divided? But he said:

"If you can only wait a little longer . . . till this fight is over . . . not so long to wait, is it?"

So that was his choice, was it? Always would he be like this! Only now would she accept first place: there could be none other. Those long years and still asked to wait. Breaking point . . . and she had broken! Time had been when such pleading would have conquered. Never again.

"I see," she said; "you ask me to trust you in this?"

"You must!"

"Must? You can't go on betraying trust, Jim, and then ask for another opportunity. Don't you remember that just before Pob was born I found a little bill concerning Miss Sophie Wontner? I've never brought this up since."

He'd known that must come. Well, it must be faced.

"I never went — went with her, Isabel. I threw it all up after, when you'd found out."

"I am to believe that?"

"It's true, Isabel, on my life it's true!"

"Even if it is, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because ——"

She smiled up at him.

"Because, Jim, you liked to keep that to yourself. A whip. Another whip!"

"It doesn't alter the fact, Isabel. This is so awfully serious. Please listen and believe."

“I’ve never asked you to listen all this time, have I? You’re a bad listener, Jim. I’m bad at listening too — now.” And then she asked: “Do you swear to me, Jim, that since that day you’ve never of your own free will been to see her?”

Ah! so he stammered at that! Dear God! to lie to her like this — lying still. Rotten with lies and cruel deceit. This last hope gone. But she hated him, now. Lowering himself so, to plead with her in his extremity. There was no good in him. Too long had this gone on. Hereafter — freedom! And to think this was what she had loved, worked for, given to, year by year! She would take from *him* now.

And Brockenholt, caught so fast in this tangle, searched desperately for some means to keep her. How could she understand how imperative it had been for him to call at that house in Bloomsbury, because Sophie was “down and out”? There was a sense of honour in that which she would never understand. But he tried, only to be cut short.

“This is monstrous, Jim. You ask me to understand that you call on this woman because she’s been a friend of yours and is now poor? I think she deserves that. You have the insolence to suggest that I might sympathize with her when, a few weeks after my marriage, she called at my house and behaved abominably, when she and you arranged to see one another, when you bought a flat for her. You ask *that*? How long do you think you can treat me like this? I came to town a silly little creature willing to be taught by you. You *have* taught me, Jim. Taught me much about that ‘world’ you are so fond of talking about. Do you think

now you're arguing with that little fool of eight years ago? I know now just what value all these ideas of yours have: just what they're worth, what you're worth. There was no need to discuss this matter. I told you so. You began it. Not only that, but you add insult to insult. It's beyond all human endurance. I've been a lunatic not to get away from it before."

He was shocked for the moment. Never before had any one so deliberately, so obviously unafraid of him, opposed him. This brittle frail wife of his, who for so long had been putty beneath his fingers, was of steel. And for the last half-hour he had been pleading with her, losing his dignity, his omnipotence. Well, if she couldn't give him the chance to put things right, she wouldn't. But, anger surging, lashed with remorse and hatred of himself, made him step beside her and lay a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off and jumped to her feet, her eyes blazing with passion, breathing deeply, white and merciless. She faced him.

"Oh! you beast," she said slowly. "You beast."

He has never found what devil's instinct prompted his next action. Only of all passions is shame most brutal and profound: deeper than love which may breed shame, crueller than hate. No time in his life before had he checked his ungovernable temper, the anxiety of Lingfields eating into his brain, his reawakened love, the scorn of his wife, her cold contempt for him, who now strove so desperately to speak the truth, the sense of some infinite loss, of shameful loss, all combined to stab his brain with one sudden and overwhelming madness of hate. Without realizing for that second what his action

meant, the action itself utterly beyond his control, he raised his hand and hit her across the mouth. The blow was delivered with knuckles unclenched, and even as it was fell short, only indeed his ring touching her lips a glancing stroke. She never moved from where she stood. Horrified and aghast, he saw before him the blurred white outline of her face, that only in the red darkness about them, a white oval of a face, and at the corner of her mouth a dribble of blood. He heard her moan, a terrible inhuman soft sound, that froze him with its horror, and then she was gone and he was alone.

He groped his way to a chair and for a long time sat there, his hands across his face, his thumbs fixed in his ears.

And in such a manner did the beast in James Brockenholt die.

CHAPTER VII

AT Seldons in Bond Street hats may be bought. The showrooms are on the first floor above a jeweller's, and to reach them it is necessary to take a small lift. The lift has only just been added, and since there are several million unemployed and therefore a shortage of labour, no attendant works the lift! A series of small buttons, numbered from one to five, will, when pressed, carry a passenger from any floor to any other floor. The lift can carry two persons, but both will be in close proximity. The door is narrow.

Miss Sophie Wontner, who had spent an agreeable hour and a half in selecting a hat, to be paid out of the temporary allowance given by James Brockenholt, to enable her to dress herself sufficiently well, as supposed by Brockenholt, in order to apply for a part in a forthcoming musical comedy, stepped from the showroom and walked down the passage to where the lift-shaft is to be found.

The corner is dark, but Miss Wontner, knowing Seldons well, experienced little difficulty in avoiding a concealed step, and by the shaft pressed the button that should bring the lift to the first floor. To her annoyance the gate below on the ground floor was apparently open, a fact which broke electrical connection and prevented the lift rising. To make certain she pressed again, and a hissing and sliding of wire-ropes made response. The lift came up slowly, the weighted disk on its especial rod descend-

ing majestically. As the roof of the lift came into view, she transferred her gaze to the weight, a glistening, steely, delightful thing that glided downwards. She was therefore a little surprised to find the doors of the lift open of their own accord, and more surprised to find herself face to face with Mrs. James Brockenholt. She had not encountered Mrs. Brockenholt since that teatime at the house in Fulham Square. Miss Wontner stared interestedly. Bless you, but how the girl had changed! She was certainly a credit to Jimmy and his methods. Very much the fine lady with that pale delicate face and the pale gold hair circling modestly and smooth over her ears, beneath the brim of the black hat. Very tall in her black dress, very dignified and white. Good for Jimmy!

Miss Wontner stepped aside, eyes aslant and amused, chin a little uplifted. But Mrs. Brockenholt made no effort to leave the lift, and asked politely:

"You are Miss Sophie Wontner, aren't you, please?"

Sophie, cocking her head on one side, the tip of her pink tongue running over her upper lip, replied:

"I am."

Mrs. Brockenholt, in no way perturbed by that clipped and somewhat insolent reply, and disregarding the aggressive twitch of the other's small shoulders, smiled distantly.

"I'm afraid I must confess to following you. I happened to be passing, and saw you turn in here. You will please excuse me accosting you like this? But, as you can understand, I have no means of finding your address. I wanted to speak to you.

Would you be good enough to give me three minutes? I have a taxi outside, and I could give you a lift into Piccadilly."

Miss Wontner considered.

"Is this quite necessary?" she asked.

"I should consider it a great favour," said Isabel.

With a shrug Sophie entered the lift, and together they descended, passed into the street and entered the taxi. As the driver let in the clutch, Miss Wontner, facing a situation as always, deliberately and immediately asked:

"Let's have it, then. This is going to be too damn funny for words."

Isabel, elegant and composed in her corner, raised an eyebrow.

"I seem to have heard that expressive term of yours before," she murmured; and then, "as we have only three minutes, perhaps I'd better come to the point at once?"

"By all means," said Sophie grimly.

"It concerns my husband," said Mrs. Brockenholt.

"Oh, yes." Miss Wontner yawned, tapping her mouth with small grey-gloved fingers. "Do go on."

"I feel, Miss Wontner, that in the past you have not been always successful in your — shall I term it — endeavours? As you are now about to meet with success in that direction — or rather, I should say, the opportunity is arriving to enable you to — er — try again — I would like you to know that such success is a little gift from myself. I mean to say, you have now my full approval and good wishes."

"I see." Miss Wontner nibbled the seam of a glove-tip. "Is that all?"

"Thank you, yes."

Then Sophie laughed, looking directly at Isabel, laughing genuinely, frankly.

"Mrs. Brockenholt," she said, "I prophesied this 'ud be funny. It is, isn't it? I'm really not trying to be rude, but it's just the situation." She stopped laughing suddenly. "You know, I'm not laughing at you. I'm not really. I do think you're rather splendid!"

As Isabel only inclined her head, she continued:

"Women are so priceless. I suppose it's because I've known such a lot of men that I'm direct. I'm glad you made me listen to you, because — oh, I mean it! I've always quite liked you, and now, because you're not going to let me think I've called heads and won, I adore you. You'll not understand my point of view, but then, you don't lead the sort of life I do. Not quite my fault, you know. It's a good stretch from Aldgate Pump to Park Lane, isn't it? And you've got to be hard."

She picked her bag off the seat and leant forward. Isabel tapped at the window. The driver nodded and brakes grinded. Sufficient unto the day, decided Sophie. Luck, and the devil's luck. Good for Carlo.

Half-way out of the cab she asked suddenly:

"Why the black?"

Isabel replied:

"Four months ago my small boy died!"

At the window Sophie said:

"Good-bye, Mrs. Brockenholt."

She watched the cab rattle into the stream of traffic down Piccadilly. She waited by the kerb for several minutes, and then made her way quickly

towards the Green Park. She found a seat near the path by the railings.

So there'd been a kid. Pretty rotten for a woman who wanted kids. A boy, too. Anyway, now the coast was clear. That meant success, and success meant security. Yes, it was the devil of a way from Aldgate Pump to Park Lane. A stormy passage. A long, long passage. What a queer sort that woman was, grabbing her at Seldons and trying to get the last word in. And eight years ago she'd been a scared mouse of a thing. Developed, she supposed, and developing in that sense wasn't great fun. She knew that well enough. It must have been a strenuous sort of going to change a girl like that. Then Jimmy was hard. You'd got to be. Kids! Heigh-ho!

Two small girls played on a strip of grass opposite. There seemed to be some difference of opinion.

"It is!"

"It isn't."

"It is."

Kids quarrelling. Women. Scratch, scratch, heigh-ho! . . . Miss Wontner chuckled, so that an old gentleman at the far end of the same seat thought better of his intentions and moved away. The small girls made faces, darted at one another. Slap, slap. The smallest girl flat on her back now, tripped up, the other on top, about to pommel. Nurse floundering along in the middle distance. "Miss Ada. Miss Ada." Cries and squeaks. Then Sophie across the path, seizing the victor by a handful of jersey.

"Shut up, you little devil! Don't hit her when she's down." A cessation of hostilities. Miss Ada

speechless, and then with a bellow of rage and fright burying her face in nurse's print dress. The victim sitting upright, serge bloomers dark against the grass. . . .

"She began it."

Nurse, uncertain which to spank, hedging.

"Thank you, Miss, I'm sure. Miss Ada, come now. . . ."

Sophie delighted.

"Beat her with a chair, nurse. Hitting her when she's down. Aren't little girls beastly cads? Good-bye."

She left the park and climbed to the top of a bus. What a morning! Women and cads! "Hitting her when she's down." Typical. Pity the world wasn't all made of men. Men gave people a chance, didn't they? They didn't hit people when they were "down." Only women did that. Most, no, some women. Still somebody was dead-nuts on those two little rotten girls. Some ass of a mother, who'd rave if they pegged out . . . some silly ass. . . . A clock, jutting out over a silversmith's shop in Knightsbridge, pointed to eleven. On a sudden impulse she scrambled from her seat, smote the brass disk violently and as the bus slowed down, leapt off and made her way into Knightsbridge Station and entered a telephone call-box. There was some delay in the exchange answer, and she rattled the receiver prong impatiently.

"Hallo. Oh, hallo. Yes. London Wall seven-two-seven-nine. No, *nine*." A gruff voice greeted her.

"Is that Lingfields? It is? Please ask Mr. James Brockenholt to speak to me. Say it's urgent."

And a minute later she was saying:

"You, Jim? Sophie here. Listen. You must take me out to lunch. I can't help that. *Please*, Jim. All right, then, I'll be at the Imperial."

She walked rapidly past St. George's Hospital, that barrack of pain. A queue, composed mostly of women, were waiting by a side entrance. Inside that heartless building, she thought, poor tortured things on hard beds were thrilled with the prospect of fifteen minutes' communication with the outside world. She examined the faces in the queue. They all looked the same. Nobody chatted, a dreary crowd, stamped with that hard hopelessness of poorer people. There must be fifty of them, fifty individuals all bound together in a common cause of anxiety. One or two of the women with blank faces stared at her as she passed. Two young girls in woollen coats and rusty black velvet hats nudged one another. They giggled. Lord, but how beastly, in all that drab line, no sign of animation, but a giggle. Soon they'd all troop in and scatter to the different wards, trudging to beds made horribly personal for fifteen minutes, mumble there, and try and sympathize. As if they could sympathize — really. Nobody could ever truly know other people's pains. Not unless — unless you'd been hurt some time so much yourself that the sight of anybody else in a similar condition recalled forbidden memories. She hurried by. A tall woman in black, reminiscent of Mrs. Brockenholt, made her cross the road and enter the park. Here it was all sunshiny. The Row was striped with the shadows of the gallant trees. Perhaps walking down the side-path with the flowers at her side, this

strange uncalled-for mood would pass away. You'd got to be hard. But that drained-out ghost of a woman, Isabel Brockenholt, haunted her. "Four months ago my small boy died." All over the place there were children, kicking about on the grass, perfectly happy. And they'd all grow up into beastly men and women with the yellow streak in 'em. What a rotten world!

The tender slopes, the fairy blue towers of Knightsbridge over the trees, the movement and colour, these things could not solace her. A large blue rubber ball bounced at her feet. She smote it back to its minute owner with a sweep of her foot.

Why hadn't Jimmy told her he'd got a kid? And that now — he hadn't. What in truth was puzzling her? She had him now and, having him, meant success for Carlo's plan and for her security. Money. Money and Carlo. Oh, but she didn't want Carlo. Did she want anybody? No, nobody — really. Nobody? What did that Isabel Brockenholt want to come and force that encounter for, upsetting things like this? Upsetting things? Surely that wasn't right, when her action simplified the scheme. Ah, pride it was. Putting her in her place. Making her cheap. Good for Isabel! But humiliating. "You're his mistress," she'd implied, "and I accept the fact. You're cheap and so's he. Go to it." And yet women generally tried to keep their men. Lord, he must have hurt her to make that mouse-creature behave like that. She'd been hurt herself, too. Marlton and that night in the porch. "One day," he'd said, "you'll find happiness, my dear." To say a thing like that! Happiness! Well, she hadn't found it yet. Would the carrying through of this

idea of Carlo's bring happiness? It would hurt Jim, and he deserved it. It would hurt that wife of his as well, and she. . . . "Four months ago ——" And to say it as she had done, so composedly and quietly, just as if she'd been talking about the loss of a five-pound note. People didn't speak like that when they were happy. Only the poor in spirit, the small in pride, gave way. Brave she was, that ghost-woman, brave and proud in her chilly serene manner. And bravery wasn't a thing to sneer at. You'd got to be — brave! And now coals of fire were to be heaped, "hitting her when she's down." What would that fair white Isabel do when this latest blow fell, when Lingfields tottered and the plot came to light, as assuredly it would, by Carlo, his object achieved, boasting and flaunting his wits as he always did? She'd stand firm, that woman, and smile coldly at the other knowing smiles and say to Brockenholt, "I told you so. That woman was always cheap — at a price." And what of Jim? Bad and mad and wild he was, driving through life like an eagle, an eagle to be winged and brought to earth. And I'm the arrow, she thought. But in that victory what triumph would there be? Thirty pieces of silver. Only amidst that ruin one person would stand unbroken: Isabel Brockenholt, with her wintry sad smile; Isabel Brockenholt, by right of love and courage. Brave love and lovely courage. No, it wasn't any use: better to admit the fact and be honest. "I can't hit her when she's down. If I'm rotten I'm not as rotten as that. She'll understand." But what of Jim? Could she bear to be honest in that respect? Yes, better so, now. Lonely she'd been a long time,

without that presence near. It hadn't been so bad in the old days with Jim about the place. You'd got to be hard, but . . . out of them all, she thought, Jim only! Jim at Capri, mad bad Jim with his sneer and taunts of the beast in him, the beast she loved. And had she no right to him? Jim, who, for all his intolerance, was above all other men by reason of his great spirit, of his indomitable will; Jim, like herself, a good fighter and hard; Jim, who had no fear. . . .

She leaned over the railings that edged the Row. Horses cantered by with glossy flanks and pricked ears; flowers behind and cool green stretches; children playing; a couple passing laughing; laughter and glad sunshine and the fairy towers of Knightsbridge. . . . "One day you'll find happiness, my dear."

Beast of a man, beast she loved. But to those same slender towers she said:

"I can't hit her when she's down. I can't. She'll win like that. Only, if of his own free will, he would come back and stay, come back and stay . . . and I'll ask him."

In such a way then did Sophie Wontner live up to her self-given reputation for "honesty." For to be honest with others is no guarantee of honesty to oneself, and ten years had passed before such a thing was with her accomplished. Now indeed did she know that James Brockenholt only could give her those things, previously despised, now so urgently needed; now indeed would she meet Isabel in fair duel, and if she could take, take she would. And she was glad to think of that attempt to come, realizing that the beast that lived in Brockenholt,

that had broken his wife, was her best and surest ally.

And with that she left the park, and within twenty minutes sat waiting in the vestibule of the Imperial.

He was late, and when he arrived, was "jumpy," she decided, "and on edge." He was certainly upset. Different, somehow, from that afternoon in Bloomsbury when she played her mean part. He was heavy with trouble. She put it down to Lingfields. At lunch he told her that things were going well, but tonight he'd got to attend a dinner.

"What dinner, Jim?"

"Press Annual dinner, run by old Carr Borton. Very important."

"Oh!"

They ate in silence, and till he questioned her:

"You got the — money?"

"Yes, Jim, thank you. And I've found decent digs."

"Good."

"I'll do what I can."

"Thanks, old sinner."

She used the old phrase to test him. He flushed and scowled across at her.

"What do you want to see me about?" he asked sharply.

"I must get a job," she parried. Some time surely during this meal she would have the opportunity, could make it, to find out — to ask him if he would come? I'm fighting fair, she thought.

He explained plans for her, and she listened, her mind elsewhere, as indeed it had to be.

She stopped him in the middle of a sentence.

"You're worried, Jim."

His face wore that same strange tortured expression that it had that first night down at Marlton at the hotel, when he'd tramped into the town alone.

"What's the matter?"

"I didn't sleep last night!" he said shortly.

"Why?"

He flicked a crumb of bread off the table.

"Worry."

"Lingfields?"

He paused.

"Yes."

It was not like Jim to let business worry him. There was something more than this.

"Can't I help?"

Soon, she thought, he'll confide in me, as he always used to, and a man confiding is a man half-primed.

He looked across at her, with none of his characteristic assurance.

"I don't think anybody can help me. My Lord, Sophie — all last night. . . . Oh, well."

"Go on," she encouraged. "Cough it up!"

"I can't tell you everything — but yesterday evening, Sophie, I discovered something!"

How funny he was, like this, just as he'd been at Marlton.

"Well?"

And then he told her, full of his own agonies, "That most assuredly, above all other things, I love my wife."

She made no answer. Beyond herself, of his own accord, had her question been answered. His face lowered, he did not see the sudden tightening of that red little mouth, nor the sudden jerk of her head. And being Sophie Wontner, most gallant of all

voyagers into strange lands, she said: "I'm glad, Jim. I'm very, very glad!"

She hardly listened to his words that followed. A long way off they were, pattering unheeded against her ears. . . .

"... One makes mistakes . . . terrible things happen . . . the boy, you see . . . all these years not even wasted, but distorted, Sophie, distorted . . . it makes one very sorry . . . one's so proud . . . and after all!"

"Let's go," she said. "Go quickly. I've got an appointment."

"Right," he said. "Let me know how you get on. If I can help . . ."

He left her at the door; and she walked in the opposite direction without looking back. People glanced at her as she passed. She was very pretty, was Sophie. But she took little notice of such tributes. She walked too quickly to notice them: she was laughing at herself. What else was there to do but laugh? Wasn't that probably the end, the answer to everything, one eternal world-without-end snigger? Those two girls in the queue outside the hospital had giggled; and she'd been disgusted. Why? She was being serious then, that was why, serious with herself, so they had offended her. Well, they were right, dead right, the only people with any real sense in that dreary careworn procession. And now she herself was giggling because it was all so utterly futile. All these plots and plans that came to nothing! One ought to have known. It wasn't anybody's fault but her own. It served her right. It served Jimmy right. And to think that always both of them had thought

they understood. As if anybody understood anything. It was the people who were so sure that they were right who were blinded by their own sense of wisdom. Pride! That was it. Vanity! That was why life cheated you of all dear things because you thought you knew all about life. That was what the Bible meant when it said the Kingdom of Heaven was only for the simple in heart. How obvious! And all these years to discover a platitude! Too damn funny for words. Of course, such things were only for the simple, because then one wasn't clever and conceited. Life didn't kick you; you kicked yourself! Lordy, Lordy, to kick yourself and then not to know it! Too damn funny! Out of them all, Carlo, Jimmy, herself, only one person was wise — Isabel Brockenholt, the silly mouse, Isabel, the ghost! And even *she* didn't know it. Didn't that make you laugh? I went to him to get him back, she thought, and kidded myself that I was playing fair. I wouldn't hit her when she was down. And I find that she isn't down. She's the only one of us who's up! So high up that now she's everlastingly raised above us. Isn't that funny? Isn't it?

So she walked rapidly down Knightsbridge, a trim alluring figure, walking steadfastly towards those airy tantalizing towers of Kensington, a brave small person, laughing because everything was so silly. Soon the tangle of traffic hid her and she was gone.

But by five o'clock post two letters were delivered at two different addresses in the City of London. They both caused consternation and dismay. Both were from Miss Wontner. Thus to James Brockenholt:

“ . . . So thank you, Jim, for all your good intentions and help. I shall stick to the five hundred you put to my credit, but I’m off abroad again. The five hundred’ll keep me till I get on the track of the dollar. I think this time a disillusioned professor of zoology will suit me if I can find one with enough to provide me with butter on Sundays. Don’t be worried. I can always manage for myself. Lord knows I always have done so. It’s no good writing here, I’m leaving no address. Bless you quite a lot, old sinner. I can’t explain. Isn’t everything silly? Don’t worry.”

Thus to Carlo Maude:

“I chuck my hand in. Sorry, Carlo darling. I know you’ll be hating me, but I’ve just got to. We’ll meet again some day. I’m really sorry to let you down. My love to little Saviour, and tell Svenk to try a white topper.”

P.S.—“I’m dreadfully sorry to let you down.”

P.P.S.—“Damn sorry.”

But Mr. Maude was very angry. He slammed into his partner’s room.

“Look at this.”

Svenk said “Hey?” and read the note.

“Well I’m ——” he began.

Carlo raged.

“And she had him. Had him on toast. Goes and does all that, and then — then mucks the whole kettle of fish. An’ we got this damn show tonight.”

He thumped the table with his fist.

“They’re all the same. They can never take

themselves, some of 'em, seriously. Marry 'em, they let you down. Keep 'em, they let you down. Shoot 'em, they let you down."

"Yep," said Svenk. "Eight foot down — sharp. Whizz!"

"Where's she gone?" he asked.

"God only knows! Oh, perish her! Aren't women cads? *Cads*, eh?"

Svenk nodded.

"And I liked that lil' girl," he said dismally.

CHAPTER VIII

THE house in Fulham Square was very quiet. It was seven o'clock in the evening. Two rooms only above the basements were illuminated: Brockenholt's study and Isabel's bedroom. The beech-tree in the Square, drowsy with the heat, made no stir with leaf or twig. A purple ominous wall of cloud advanced encircling from the east. Thunder in the air, oppression and a lull before the first tearing of lightning and splintering of thunder; a tense time, sullen and brooding.

Brockenholt, immaculate in evening dress, scribbled notes on a slip of paper. Tonight Sir Carr Borton was to give his annual dinner to the Press; tonight the guest of the evening was James Brockenholt, of Lingfields; a great night with all opportunity for putting in the final word for Lingfields. Tomorrow the papers would be full of the theme of these notes on the small slip of paper. But those selfsame details would not be given by himself. There was a little plot, a pretty plot. The idea had originated from dear old Lady Carr Borton. Sir Carr, she'd confided to Brockenholt, could not, under the circumstances, call upon the head of Lingfields to speak when Motor Transport sat near by. That was a thing "not done." But wouldn't it — and she had been pleased to suggest it — wouldn't it be a nice idea if Sir Carr called upon Mrs. Brockenholt to say a few words? Quite impromptu, of course, but dear Isabel, and how every one admired

her so, would so delight everybody with her *naïveté* and charm. Just a few words?

Brockenholt had agreed. A pretty plot indeed. Isabel had consented. He had made these few notes for her. He folded them carefully. What a triumph was this! Assuredly had his training been good to enable her so splendidly to assist him. Lingfields and Isabel. A double triumph. A grand and enthusiastic night to herald success to come, with all the world to watch and hear through the columns of the Press. Upstairs that silent wife of his was busy dressing. They had not spoken to one another since their last meeting in the same room, yesterday evening. She ought not to be long now. Perhaps he should call up to her and hand her the notes, and ask her if she was clear about everything — not nervous? But that would mean facing her alone, with eyes attempting to avoid the tiny crimson spot at the corner of her mouth. No, better to leave her. It wouldn't do to have any upset at this significant moment. Moreover, was it very wise to think too much about her? But how could such thoughts be prevented? Shame still with him, as it had been all last night, scenes, poignantly vivid, repeated themselves, intruding on these other details, breaking concentration. The importance of tonight's affair could not now overwhelm this shame remembered. He had been too busy, too preoccupied these eight years to give thought to Isabel; now at this extreme moment recollection of many little things done were so many scourgings. Even as it had been that afternoon in Marlton, so it was now. Pride had made him act wantonly, pride was gone. That greatest shame of

all, his hand across her mouth, was but little compared with those years' accumulation of wrong things. Yet in that last fatal act did not salvation lie, in that its violent reaction had shaken his mind's balance, its set ideas tumbling from their supposedly firm shelf, so that he saw most clearly what kind of man he must be to set on high such empty gods while the image of reality stood neglected. But this image he had made, this Isabel, was she not now come to dreadful life, and he a Pygmalion whose answered prayers were but a gift of sorrow? Long she had served him well; now indeed was he a slave, driven by his own whips, imprisoned by his own deeds. Never again should such things be: he would tell her soon, if she would but speak to him. What poor thing had he draped with love's raiment when love herself stood naked by, and he, blind to her, even now still blind, yet not with a great darkness but a greater light. So when these affairs of tonight were completed, before Lingfields itself was crowned, he would go to her, very humble, stripped of those old worn ideas, and ask her only this: to let him stay by her and wait, perhaps to atone. And in time with care she might know indeed the beast in him had died most suddenly and for always. Never again to hurt her. . . . There was a song, a silly song, wasn't there, that he used to know — "Oh, I want cher! Yes, I want cher!" He'd forgotten that, but now those rubbishy words called up a window in the night with her standing there and he on the road beneath with the wind tumbling over the black clenched fist of Barbary.

How tangled these things became: Isabel, Sophie and himself. And now Sophie gone, Heaven knew why or where, going out again of her own free will on another tempestuous journey, driven out of shelter as he too was driven out to face the enemy beyond the threshold, himself. But of this enough. There was neither time nor opportunity to go to her at this moment, but when they returned tonight he would say what he must.

Isabel sat before the glass in her room. Lisette would be coming up in a minute. Just time, then, to see nothing had been forgotten. She rose and opened a portmanteau upon a chair. It was full. She rehearsed its contents on her fingers: closed it, snapped-to the lock. From her bag on the dressing-table she took out an envelope, examined the tickets, replaced them. Came a tap at the door.

"Come in, Lisette."

The maid advanced to the centre of the room. Not now Lisette the imperturbable, the efficient, but a frightened Lisette with red rimmed eyes and trembling hands.

"Ah, Lisette. This is the portmanteau. I packed it myself. You will take a cab half an hour after Mr. Brockenholt and I have left for Sir Carr's. Please put it in the cloak-room at Waterloo."

"Yes, Madam."

"And, Lisette. Take with you my brown coat and skirt, the large coat and the felt hat, please. They're all together in the bottom drawer of the wardrobe. You're quite clear about everything?"

"Yes, Madam."

"The ladies' waiting-room, first class. Be in the

doorway by the big advertisement. I will change in there. And don't move away at all. I may be in a hurry. Oh, and the jewel-case, too!"

"Yes, Madam."

"Thank you, Lisette; will you come back, please, in ten minutes to dress me? Thank you!"

Alone again she moved from drawer to drawer inspecting. Yes, everything was neat and left in order. The bed-cover was pulled up, the brushes and silver boxes before the mirror piled on one side, the washing-stand cleared of sponge and tooth-brush and little bottles. All in order and her mind clear and arranged. She knew she ought to be tired but excitement stimulated her nerves. This morning her three minutes with Miss Wontner, this afternoon a long talk with Noggins. What a lot Noggins knew about "business" and its ways and means. How often had Jim said: "You don't know anything about business." Well, she knew now. Enough, at any rate, for what she had to do. Certainly, her speech should be a success. A waft of heated, sultry air blew in between the curtains. Thunder about. . . .

How oppressive the place was, but a prison no more. Queer to think how one could obliterate eight years in prison by a thought of a razing of prison walls and freedom. Eight years! No, eight hundred years, brimmed with tears. A long and terrible nightmare with a nightmare ending. Or were endings just beginnings, the chance to begin afresh? Or always would four walls confine? But an end now to this poor play, a lowering of a great curtain and hereafter a choice of memories. Even now she could choose those ghosts: whose

chin, all raspy with morning-beard, did she touch, fearing to waken, or whose deep husky voice close to her ear whispering, out of the past, such tender silly things — whose voice? Not Jim's; yet Jim's. Whose patter of feet, small ghostly feet along the passage, who strutting across the carpet, hands deep in knicker-pockets, bright hair awry? Pob with her, and yet no Pob. Ah, but better like this . . . so much better to live on slowly, spending the years ahead wandering along those dusky corridors of mind till release should come, and a long sleeping with her toys beside her, toys of her poor love, poor brittle toys. Nor would God, seeing that really and truly she had paid her way with all her heart's coin, steal those toys whilst she slept, but leave them there so that through that infinite last sleep she might in her dreams stretch out a slumbering hand and touch them for comfort, and if it should indeed come to pass that morning came, when light rose eventually, wouldn't she still find them there all ready to handle again with delight, and perhaps God, who would understand she'd given all and now was bankrupt, wouldn't mind very much if she loved the new real Jim who might have been, and the same Pob, as much as she would love Him for pitying her so and guarding her while she slept. And meanwhile Time, uneventful, slipping by, would heal what now was raw and painful. Soon it would be all over. Soon now. But before that going, a thing to be done that should quench her hate. . . .

She heard Lisette enter and move about the room.

"I am ready, Lisette."

She sat before the looking-glass while those clever

hands worked amongst her hair. Lisette was very silent this evening. Her fingers would play her false, so that she fumbled with the fastening of the gown. At length everything was completed.

"Madam tonight is more beautifuller than ever before. Madam's little speech will be a great success."

"Dear Lisette."

"Ah! Madam,"—her face turned away, a scrambling for a handkerchief. . . .

"Dear Lisette. No, no. Don't do that. Be happy, Lisette. I'm happy."

"Madam . . . it is not the leaving, Madam. . . . I say many times Madam should go . . . but I have been so proud to look after Madam, to serve Madam . . . downstairs they do not know, but when Madam is gone . . . not that great pig! but we others, who are the servants, they will be ver' un'appy because they see too, Madam . . . for long time we watch and see Madam, who used to be so shy and sweet, grow cold and hard . . . never with us, but always always never cry, but look and look . . . we are so 'appy with Madam . . . and now . . ."

"Come, come, Lisette."

"It is not only Madam 'oo have a broken heart!"

Downstairs steps sounded. A bell rang.

"The car, Lisette. My dear, bless your faithfulness. All of you. My cloak! There! Don't let him — them — see, Lisette. Go to Mrs. Naughton's afterwards. She'll look after you. Good night, Lisette."

"Good-bye, Madam, if ——"

So for the first and last time Isabel kissed her,

and then, gathering her cloak about her, ran downstairs.

Brockenholt, hat in hand, coat over his arm, stood waiting. He handed the notes to her. She took them without a word. They passed down the seven steps beneath the Doric portico, and as the mahogany front door with the brass network over its green glass panels closed gently, out of the east the first wicked snarl of thunder broke the heavy silence.

Every year the Press Annual Dinner, with Sir Carr Borton of the *Globe* in the chair, is held at the Connington Hotel, Northumberland Avenue. Not infrequently it is a tedious and heavy business of innumerable courses and interminable speeches. But on this occasion a definite sense of excitement and expectation intrigued the assembly in the Central Banqueting Hall. Were not those two furious rivals, James Brockenholt of Lingfields and Carlo Maude of Motor Transport, to sit at the one and the same chief table? And would it not require all old Sir Carr's tact and good judgment to obviate any personalities or show any sign of favouritism in his address? And would not that address refer very forcibly to the "sterling service" of both these "pioneers in the future means of transportation"?

No sooner had the four hundred present taken their seats before the long tables than glances were directed towards that other and more majestic table where Sir Carr Borton sat. People whispered and pointed with sidelong eyes. "Yes, the tubby little man with the white moustache — that's Sir Carr! Oh, yes! That's Lady Burrington beside him, and next to Lady Carr is old Burrington. He's one of

the speakers. Terrible. All air and words. Then — yes, that's Brockenholt next to — I forget — and that's his wife beside Sir Richard Penn — you know, Penn of the *Pictorial* — the war-correspondent — 'Dick of the *Pic.*' Mrs. Brockenholt next to him. And there's Maude down on the right! What? I don't see how they can expect 'em to speak. Too personal."

The dinner progressed sedately. Brockenholt, beside Mrs. Proutopoli, talked little. It was of no account. Mrs. Proutopoli was agog. Her conversation bubbled out of her and overflowed. She was very much alive to the significance of the occasion. It had given her much pleasure to bow but coldly to Mr. Maude in the reception room before dinner. She was pleased with her efforts as regards Lingfields. Certainly Mrs. Proutopoli was a woman of affairs.

"And how's your dear wife?" she asked James Brockenholt.

"Splendid, thanks so much."

She leant towards him, her fuzzy hair almost touching his shoulder.

"You mustn't worry, my dear boy. Tino would never let me worry. Everything's going to go off beautifully." She tittered. "Won't it, *Sir James*?"

He smiled at her. "Thanks to you. Lingfields doesn't worry me."

"That's good then," said Mrs. Proutopoli. "That's good."

But Brockenholt thought differently.

Sir Richard Penn, of the *Pictorial*, who now met Isabel Brockenholt for the first time, was agreeably surprised. He had been led to expect a young

woman, dignified and of surpassing beauty but of little enterprise. In point of fact he watched Mrs. Brockenholt's glass with satisfaction. He was one of the remaining journalists of a past generation, a hearty man scornful of the modern methods of the younger members of his profession who, to his way of thinking, lived on nothing but hot milk and *tonic-water*. He liked a glass of wine, did Sir Richard, and liked to see others like it, especially pretty women. But if old "Dick of the *Pic*" watched Isabel's glass, a freckled young man with jealous eyes watched that fair and lovely face. For where a table of lesser lights made a corner with this other, within easy earshot sat Leonard Lang-Davies, while opposite him Mr. Save Savour criticized all the wines and some of the food.

But of Mr. Save Savour's comments Leonard heard few, and the publicity agent of Motor Transport relapsed into a sullen and supercilious state of boredom.

But he ventured one remark:

"If only old Burrington would stab a waiter with a fork this show might be amusing. At least there would be a pretty scoop if one managed to get out of the door and collar a line before those swine on the *Gazette*. Nothing *ever* happens at these shows."

Leonard agreed. Nothing, he thought, ever did happen as it should. He had not seen Isabel for some little time, respecting her wishes. But the sight of her tonight so near and marvellous was a torch to rekindle that blaze he had sought to quench. There was about her an animation and light-heartedness which he found incompatible with her usual behaviour; he was not so sure he liked it. The mood

seemed assumed, so well he felt he knew her, and old Dick's glee at her flippancies was a spur to jealousy. He decided that for once she was being a little silly and living up to Carlo Maude's criticism of her as "brainless."

But not only Leonard and Brockenholt, amongst this assembly, were on edge, for Carlo, seven seats away, ate his food impatiently and gulped his wine as frequently as the waiter attending to that section passed by. Sophie Wontner's letter had not been the best of appetizers to such a function as this. She was incomprehensible, was Sophie, and "wantonly wayward." He writhed at the failure of his plans and drank to her eternal damnation at each mouthful of wine. To take so great trouble, working out details, dovetailing, only to be "let down" at the last minute. It was enough to make any chap feel murder in his blood. A rumour could have been started tonight, a hint dropped here and there that would set 'em all wondering. Now Brockenholt, sitting up there, four seats ahead of him as it were, always four units superior in all things — popularity, Lingfields. . . . His disgust was not lessened by a booming voice, clanging over the four hundred heads:

"My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, pray silence for Sir Carr Borton."

Now for it, old Borton on his feet, smiling genially, all eyes towards him, a scrambling preparation for silence, and then the old man's steady voice clear and resonant. Carlo grimaced at the waiter. He fingered the stem of his glass. Rotten port too; cheap and spirity, not a bit the sort of thing to provide. He hated port at any time, got you down

if you weren't careful. Old Borton hard at it . . .

"It is not often that pioneers meet with instant recognition. I am sure all present must share my pleasure in having Mr. Brockenholt and Mr. Maude with us here tonight." A rattling that showed appreciation, whisperings, and every one smiling. Svenk bending back over his chair and winking at Carlo, saying something:

"Hey?"

"Look cheerful," Svenk was saying.

Yes, he'd better look cheerful, though they didn't seem to be taking much notice of *him*. Like a magnet, that man Brockenholt. Look cheerful! Pish! Cheerful when the whole bag of tricks was up the spout because Sophie 'ud gone potty and the port was like bee-food.

"I don't think there is any need for me to elaborate by any poor words of mine the valuable services rendered by these two gentlemen. I know many of us, and many more important than ourselves, were enabled to carry on when faced with extreme difficulties during the last two railway strikes. Nor need I tell you that the Ministry of Transport is at this moment deciding which of these great firms is to be taken under the official wing. I am sure we wish both Mr. Brockenholt and Mr. Maude success. May the best man win!" Louder applause, everybody craning to watch the emotions portrayed by the rivals. "I only wish ——" Carlo tipped his glass high. Well, what did he wish, the woolly old idiot? "I only wish that these two eminent gentlemen could join forces and then both would win." Laughter rippling all over the hall. What? More port. All right then. Hadn't they

got anything better than this? "Join forces." Oh! ha! ha! damn funny!

"But I must not keep you long. . . ."

Pish! Well, if Lingfields did get in, what then? It wasn't very likely that Brock would reconsider a suggestion of amalgamation. He'd turned him down too hard before. He'd have to talk it over with Svenk. After all, there was time yet. . . .

"I must not keep you long. We have several speakers of far greater value than myself. I cannot, of course, ask either Mr. Brockenholt or Mr. Maude to inform you now of their efforts. But I would like to suggest"—a slight wave of the hand and a kindly smile beneath the white moustache, an inclination of the head—"I would like to suggest that a lady present might just tell us all what it's like to be a helpmate to a great man."

Carlo, his glass half-raised, lowered it. Hallo, what's the idea? Helpmate to a great man? Always with the Press this sob-stuff. Couldn't get away from it. Sob-stuff and bee-food. Made you sick.

Sir Carr Borton, now smiling widely:

. . . "Therefore I call upon Mrs. James Brockenholt to let us into the secret of success."

For a moment the assembly gasped, thought rapidly, grinned, and broke into applause. Good old Borton! Just like him to spring a surprise on them. Where was she? Ah! there. Bless her heart, she was getting up now. This was going to be fun. The girl had pluck. Things were livening up a bit.

Brockenholt, in his seat by Mrs. Proutopoli, heard that growing murmur of interest and applause as if from a great distance. He saw Isabel rise from her seat and heard that booming voice:

"My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, pray silence for Mrs. James Brockenholt."

Mrs. Proutopoli nudged him. He took no notice of her. His interest was centered on the pattern of the table cloth. Somehow he dared not watch Isabel as she stood there. She had said nothing in the car on the way here. She must be nervous. My dear, he whispered to the damask, God bless you for this. They're welcoming you, Isabel, all looking up and towards you. I too, Isabel. I know now what effort it costs you to do this; all this for me. When we're home, I'll tell you then how well I know it, everything now. How dreadfully sorry I am, how very poor I feel beside you. God bless you for this, my dear.

A strange prayer was that in a strange place.

Leonard Lang-Davies near her could have cried aloud at the pain of her loveliness. Even this, she would do for that master of hers; making a cheap gesture to heighten his success, sacrificing herself as always.

She began to speak:

"My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen . . ."

Four hundred gratified faces were lifted to hers. "Dick of the *Pic*" wagged his head. What a woman! God, but there weren't too many of 'em about these harum-scarum days, he'd be bound. Dashed if some fellows didn't have the devil's luck.

"I do think it's very nice of Sir Carr to think you'd want to listen to me."

A ripple of laughter and voices:

"No! No!" "Of course we do."

Sir Richard Penn leaning forward murmuring:

"A treat, Mrs. Brockenholt, a regular treat."

Mrs. Proutopoli whispering towards Brockenholt's lowered head:

"Dear Jim! How splendid! She's got them all."

Isabel continuing, standing very erect, two bright spots on either cheek, finger-tips just touching the table:

"I think Sir Carr wanted me to tell you what it's like to know a great man intimately?"

Nodding of heads; this was the sort of thing, wasn't it? Making the show lively. Nothing like it. These after-dinner speeches. . . .

"I don't think I could possibly tell you that. But it's supposed to have its compensations."

Laughter and knowing looks at Brockenholt. Pulling his leg, what? Pretty good, eh?

"Naughty boy, Jim," from Mrs. Proutopoli. Sir Carr Borton leaning back in his chair, tugging at his moustache, chuckling.

Isabel, still speaking in her clear low voice:

"I expect there are always compensations for doing what you're told. I suppose I shall get my reward in Heaven."

Very good, very good. Bit near the knuckle, don't you know, what? I mean to say . . . still, all right, of course!

"There are, I see, more gentlemen than ladies present, but it is to the women I want to speak. I think to them I have only one thing to say: if your face is your fortune it may prove a very ill-fortune."

The assembly, growing embarrassed, shuffled in their chairs.

"As for Lingfields and Motor Transport, as my husband has always told me, I know next to nothing

of business, so I can't tell you much about that, can I? Business always seems to me to be a very complicated affair. I wonder how any one ever knows just what they're doing."

Subdued laughter. This was better. Getting a bit — well — over-doing it rather before, what?

"I think women should keep out of the rather technical side of their husband's affairs. In every way, I mean. It was only this morning that my husband told me not to ask questions."

Renewed laughter.

"I don't generally ask many. But when he suggested that he should make all his money over to me — I expect all the ladies present wish they had so generous husbands, don't they?"

The four hundred lowered their eyes. Getting a bit out of hand, wasn't she? Pity, when she'd started off so well.

"And that when that was done, I should put it all into Motor Transport, which is run, as you know, by his dear old friend Mr. Carlo Maude. I had to ask him what the idea was?"

A thunderbolt flung from the storm outside could not have brought so terrible a climax. Leonard saw Isabel look up, blush crimson at the horrified regard of four hundred eyes, turn frightened to Sir Richard. He saw Penn's smile flick suddenly from his face, saw Brockenholt swing round with terror and amazement, saw old Burrington blow out his cheeks and Sir Carr Borton gesture hurriedly. That silence pinioned them all, and then some one coughed, faces were averted and Isabel sat down suddenly. Sir Carr beckoned to the major-domo. Again that booming voice:

“My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, pray silence for Lord Burrington of Burrington.”

Burrington began to speak. But what he said no one heard. The hall was stricken. What had *she* said? What had that little fool said? What only could it mean? *Bankruptcy! Treachery!* Lang-Davies saw three young men with knowing glances at one another steal from their seats and slip through a side-door. Save Saviour flung his cigar on to the table. “The *Gazette* crowd,” he groaned. “Can you get out, Davies?”

But Leonard, fast held in this nightmare of disaster, could only watch Lady Carr Borton helping Isabel from her seat; Brockenholt, half-rising, only to be pulled down by Sir Carr; could only gaze and say nothing but, “Oh, my God, she’s bust him. She’s *bust* him!”

Seven seats away Mr. Carlo Maude straightened his tie jauntily, and smiled confidently upon the assembly.

He beckoned the waiter.

“What about a brandy-and-soda,” he said.

CHAPTER IX

At twelve minutes past eleven the Press Annual Dinner was at an end. For two hours previously all telephone boxes within a quarter of a mile of the Connington Hotel, Northumberland Avenue, had been engaged. In high-perched Fleet Street offices, news-editors with ears to the receivers gabbled directions over their shoulders, countermanded whole columns of over-seas and continental news, stormed at their printers, swept into their special editions. A silly woman's speech had gathered to a roar.

But down the emptying streets of Knightsbridge, Chelsea and the Fulham Road a frantic man in a frantic car sped to a house in Fulham Square. Arrived there, he ran up the seven steps beneath the Doric portico and wrenched at the bell beside the mahogany door with the brass network over the green glass on its upper panels, and in time a decent and impassive manservant opened the door and let him in. Rain beat into the servant's face, so that before his eyes he held a shielding hand, while with the other he manipulated the lock and pressed against the door with his shoulder. The rain lashed the door, leapt in spray upon the seven steps, along the pavements. The beech-tree in the Square bent to the torrent. Round the corner opposite the house other footsteps padded, pursuing footsteps of patent leather evening shoes, their soles soaked pulpy, running over the streaming stones, the trouser above the ankle splashed. At the bottom of the seven steps the pursuer stopped, the storm

encircling him, wrapping his saturated coat around his legs. The light sea-green and dull gleaming through the upper panels of the door disappeared. The house in Fulham Square receded into the shadows. Very tall seemed the house, and grim, impregnable. For a second its white front sprang into existence to a crooked tear of light in the sky. The watcher rubbed the rain from his eyes and looked aloft. An iron railing topped the balcony over the Doric portico. At the detonation of thunder almost overhead, he ran to the far side of the road. Beneath the dripping leaves of the beech-tree, he waited.

It was not easy to perturb Waller. He was accustomed to various methods of home-comings. Now, brushing the rain from the lapels of his coat, he replied to his master's question of, "Mrs. Brockenholt come in?" calmly:

"No, sir. Not that I knows of."

He had seen Brockenholt in many moods, but not one like this. The violent pealing of the bell had jerked him from a drowsy perusal of the evening paper in the pantry. Never before had the bell clanged so desperately. Never before had his master burst into the hall with so strange a look, "Like as if he's been pursued by goblins," he told Mrs. Bortle. "Flings his coat all lumped-up on the chest; white as his cuffs he was, half-deafens me, he does, yelling, 'Where's Mrs. Brockenholt?' 'Ow do I know? They goes out together, and then that Lisette hops it, and then he comes back like a wounded lion. Pretty goings on, indeed.'"

Nevertheless, Waller replied:

"No, sir, not that I knows of."

To her room went James Brockenholt. He switched the light on. Empty. On the dressing-table the brushes heaped neatly on one side; the washing-stand stripped of its sponges and little bottles. All neat, all empty. He opened each drawer, wrenched at the wardrobe. All things, there, were folded, put away as if their owner had gone for a holiday. He ran downstairs. A fire was burning in the grate of the drawing room. The Rose du Barry curtains swayed gently to the devil's tattoo of the rain upon the lean windows. The room was inviting, a table beside the great arm-chair glittered with its burden of decanters and silver. The flames crackled and the wind groaned at the windows. On the mantelpiece a sweet shy face in its silver frame smiled down at him. He thought the photographed eyes mocked him. He took the frame down and slipped it into his pocket. Even so he kept one hand on it. He passed from the drawing room to the study. The place was just as he had left it, the desk littered with papers, the large silver inkstand with its lip cocked back, the circle of ink shining like marble. The room was chilly and full of draught. Loathing the place suddenly he pulled the door to gently. Down in the hall Waller waited.

"Shall I lock up, sir?"

"Not yet, Waller. I'll lock up, Waller."

Echoing footsteps.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night."

A great silence in the empty house.

He returned to the drawing room and poured

himself out a drink. An evening paper lay upon the chair. A headline ran: "Fate of Lingfields in the balance." Tonight's paper. Tonight's. What would the headlines blazon this time tomorrow night? He crumpled the paper and pushed it on to the fire where it roared merrily. Lingfields broken, broken himself. He sat down and something snapped sharply in his pocket. He drew out the frame. Across the glass a crack spread diagonally from top to bottom, smaller cracks radiating obliterated the face and shoulders, only the eyes, freakishly uncovered, mocked softly up at him. Now he should be telling those eyes what he now could never tell. The fact must be grasped and faced. She was gone. Why had he let old Carr Borton stop him from following her when she had left the hall after that fatal remark? What did anything matter compared with her? What had anything ever mattered? Broken he was now, Lingfields, himself, everything. The Rose du Barry curtains blew into the room, dropped back into their long folds. Coal in the grate sang, spurting vivid tufts of fire. Gone. All things of hers neat and folded, as if she was on holiday. Had she not paid for such a release? *Paid*. That was it. It was all a matter of payment. And he had thought to refund such coin of hers squandered on him by words and tokens that he termed "making it up." What worth were such words and tokens? How small a weight to level the balance of wrongs done to her. Too easy, he thought, too easy that way. There can be no compromise. I must pay back now that long debt overdue. Very clearly he understood — of her own free will she would not return and to search her

out and to ask such a thing of her would be to forego full payment on his part. Perhaps then, one day she too would understand, appreciating this harder way and though no word of hers would tell him of that realization, might not this thing he had sinned against bring, in some now hidden manner, a recompense? We are born, he thought, prisoners in a shameful house divided against itself and we live there till ransom is paid for freedom. All of us prisoners, chained and shackled with links of our own making. Only when everything is lost, is all found. It is very simple. It is very hard. But it's true. I think one should be grateful to lose so much, to suffer much. We should be proud of tears that rust the links and bring release. We pay with tears. Isabel has paid and Sophie, and now my turn comes. This is the simple truth that is so terrible and certain that we shut our eyes to it. We are cowards who dare not face ourselves. He shook the broken glass from her photo into the grate. I'm going to pay now, he told that mean symbol of her: you shall go free, if you wish, and I shall never be near you again to hurt you so. I have been so blind. But, my dear, because it has all been so disastrous, hasn't it also been magnificently worth while? Eight years ago I put you in my heart and now for always you will stay there. No one, not even you yourself, can take that image away; and often I can go there to remind myself of myself. I think we're both free now. I think you as well will think of me like this. Whatever we have done this remains. It is worth while paying for. My dear, my dear, I am so ashamed, but so glad. I am complete, now.

He turned in his chair at the sudden clatter of the window behind the Rose du Barry curtains. Leaning against the grand-piano, the rain dripping from his clothes, his freckled face grey in that mellow light, stood Leonard Lang-Davies. One hand gripped his coat collar, holding it close round his throat, the other was behind his back.

They faced one another in that inviting room, while the rain sprang through the open window and stained the curtains black.

"Ah," said Brockenholt softly, "I seem to recognise you."

"I've come," said Lang-Davies, and his voice shook; "I've come to settle up with you, you swine."

His right arm moved to his side. His fingers were closed over the black smooth sides of an automatic pistol.

He looked round the room uneasily, searching for something.

"Where is she?"

And then Brockenholt smiled.

"Gone," he said.

"You're a liar." That freckled face in its intensity and anger was grotesque. "I came here because I knew what you'd do to her when you got back. I've known a long time. I'm not afraid now. It's any man's right. It's my right. Where is she?"

"I'll not ask you to explain how you entered my house," Brockenholt said, "but it's a good climb over the porch. No matter. Aren't you rather impetuous? My wife is not here."

"Where's she gone?"

"I don't know. To her mother perhaps."

“Then ——”

“Yes! She said what she did on purpose. She is not here now.”

“She broke you on purpose.”

“Yes, on purpose.”

The finger round the pistol trembled. And then:

“My God, Brockenholt, I’m sorry. I never thought —— To kick you when you’re down. I wouldn’t — still ——”

Brockenholt crossed to him.

“Do you know,” he said, “I could get you put in prison for this. You know that? But then you’ve never been in prison, have you? You see I have. So I wouldn’t do that. I’ve just come out myself. You don’t understand? No matter. One only gets out of prison by paying. I’m willing to pay for my release. There’s a front door downstairs. I’ll show you. It’s not even locked yet. You might have tried that. You see, I didn’t lock it because — well — because I thought she might come back. Now I know she won’t. We’d better go down, hadn’t we?”

Without another word they went downstairs. The fringe of the storm swept over the house. Behind, a stretch of lighter sky was pricked with stars.

At the door Brockenholt said:

“She’ll be down in Marlton, I think. You know the house. There’s a window that looks down on the road. If you feel you must go to Marlton, Davies, don’t hesitate because of me. I shall not go down there. One has to pay very fully, I think. There is no compromise. . . .”

And with those words in his ears, Leonard Lang-Davies ran down the seven steps beneath the Doric

portico, ran past the beech-tree in the Square, while Brockenholt closed the mahogany door and locked it.

He sat in the drawing room till daylight came, a weak pale light out of the east.

And as the sun rose, painting the wet roofs with gold, he turned his face to that poor warmth, and seemed to find in that token of the day's beginning a strange comfort; for he told the chimney-pots his son had loved:

"There is no compromise. But one can always begin again. I think we have all paid, haven't we? Isabel and Sophie and I? I am glad I know now. I am very glad. It would be terrible to die before one knew."

The curtains flung wide, that early glory about the room. Wheels rumbled past the Square; wagon-loads of fruit and flowers passed westwards to Covent Garden. The buses were filled with corduroyed workmen talking in a desultory fashion. The day marched westwards with the crates of flowers. In the Square a rat-faced organ-grinder tugged his organ out of its shelter in the Mews. As he turned into the stream of traffic he whistled. His barrel-organ was very old — its tunes were out of date. But one of them he liked. He whistled as he went:

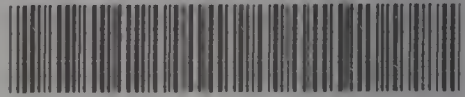
"Oh, Honey, when the silver moon is gleaming . . ."

He didn't think much of the words; he liked the air. That was why he whistled. He thought the words were rather stupid. He was sure they couldn't mean anything.

THE END

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